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★ STARBURST

GAME OF
THRONES
SEASON 5

ALSO:

**RABID
DOCTOR WHO
STAR TREK TOS
TIME TRAVEL MOVIES
CONAN THE BARBARIAN
DIVERGENT SERIES: INSURGENT
AND MORE!**

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**ISSUE
410**

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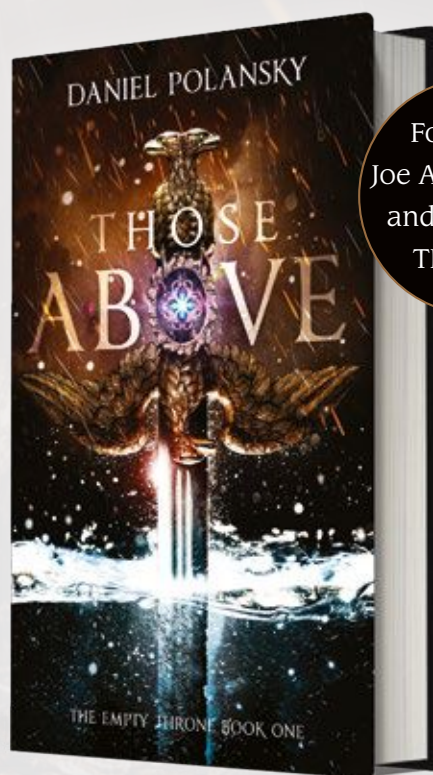
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LIZARD

STARBURST HQ is grateful for the protection of our faithful Lizard TETSUO. A rebel survivor from the Icke Reptilian Wars of the '80s, TETSUO remains vigilant to this day, upholding his promise to protect all of mankind from the ever present threat of reptilian evil.

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to STARBURST Issue 410,

This is the second time that I have presided over a **GAME OF THRONES** issue, and the show just goes from strength to strength. This issue we look back over the entire series so far, and it's literary origins. We even have a butchers at the board games. If you like time travel and fairies (the ones with the dust), well we have that covered as well. We read your minds every issue, and give you the good stuff, but never at the expense of your regular column fixes. Hell, we even have **ROBOT OVERLORDS** and have a **RABID** look back in time.

Until next issue,
Keep watching the weird and wonderful,



Jordan Royce
EDITOR



FEEDBACK

You can write to STARBURST via snail mail:
STARBURST MAGAZINE, PO Box 4508, Manchester, M61 0GY
or email: letters@starburstmagazine.com

THE PEDANT STRIKES BACK

Right now. Having just read your article on the latest STAR WARS film I'm frankly amazed that you have completely missed two very important plot points. Firstly it will be based in a galaxy far, far away, and secondly it all happened long ago. Although how episodes 1, 2, 3 arrived after 4, 5, 6 is quite beyond me. Keep up the good work That is all. Best regards,
Ralph Greig, via EMAIL

The farce is strong with this one...

ROBOT WARS

Loving the mag so far; the cover really stands out and each issue

seems to be getting thicker whilst other mags get thinner.

Loved the comprehensive coverage of robots, though you didn't cover the burning question: Would Johnny 5 win in a fight against CHAPPIE?

Live Long and Prosper,
Kristen Sutherland, via EMAIL

Thanks, it's the specially imported Swedish manure we massage into our magazine, it makes it grow and grow! Well you never know what could be in the post credits sequence, we might get to see that! But our money is on CHAPPIE!
Peace and Long Life, Kristen!

STAR

HADDOCK'S CHIPS ARE DOWN

You. Buggers. So the latest issue of STARBURST plops through my letterbox (#409) and there on the cover is Robby the robot, sitting behind R2-D2. Nice one lads. FORBIDDEN PLANET is my all time favourite sf movie so a big smile appears on my face. Then that very same day I go to work, and on the way in I spy the newsstand edition of STARBURST. And this one has got not only Robby on the cover but Anne Francis as well! You. Buggers. It's not like I can just walk on by and ignore it. Can I? So I have to buy that one as well. Cos it's my all time favourite movie. And then I have a selective read of the articles (twice, as I've now got two copies so want to get my monies worth). And I doubly agree with everything Paul Mount says about GOTHAM and AHS: FREAKSHOW and BLACK MIRROR and DR WHO. And Robby is the number one robot (RIP Mr Kinoshita). And there's an article on the awesome Night of the Demon. And THEN I get to that two page review of ELITE: DANGEROUS, a game I have been dithering over buying since it's official December launch (as I loved

the 80's Spectrum and 90's Amiga versions). And that review finally swung it for me Mr Royce. But now it occurs to me I'll probably need to upgrade my graphics card to get the most out of it. And then I'll want an Oculus Rift! Cos I will. And I still need to pay my Xmas Visa bills off. And you're just not helping matters one bit. I feel another bank job coming on.

You. Buggers.

*Eddie Maddock/Haddock,
via EMAIL*

Jordan M Royce, editor of STARBURST replies:
Thanks for the kind words Eddie. Obviously I am determined to make sure that you do not suffer any further financial troubles. I promise that from now on our primary goal will be to make certain that you are not led astray any further. That said I think you should check out louisellentripes.com as they are selling real life replicas of the KNIGHT RIDER Trans Am for only \$60,000.00. I think you should get one. It's just up your street Eddie!

LETTER

DOCTOR WHERE?!

I loved the 407 WHO cover, but can't look at it in the same way after reading the comment from Matthew Barber in last month's letters page about it looking as though the Doctor was emerging from... somewhere.

Lewis, via EMAIL

Us too! We bumped into the good Doctor at Digi-Con this month. We were dying to have him pose like our cover, but



despite his extra hearts he didn't have enough hands, so he held the magazine and STARBURST Shauna assisted with his flaps!

D'YA THINK HE SAUR-US?

Good to have you guys back in the podcastverse.

I too am excited for JURASSIC WORLD and have a theory on where it will go as a franchise that I feel the need to share with anyone who will listen.

So JURASSIC WORLD is the name of the theme park on n this first one. However, I think we'll see the dino's escape and take over the actual planet leading us towards JURASSIC WORLD: APOCALYPSE and other such colonic titles. Think of the framework of the RESIDENT EVIL films (but starting in a theme park instead of underground lab). Whaddaya reckon? Am I looking right, or am I right??? You read it here first!!!!

While you were away, I

was so starved of podcasts that me and bestie mate Dan started our own. We review the weeks comics and discuss trailers and movie news (usually taken from your very own website/magazine). If you feel the need to listen to two hairy faced idiots witter on about four colour funny books then do listen in to; WHEN GIANT MONSTERS ATTACK BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE DIE. whengiantmonstersattack.podbean.com

Lovely to hear you guys again. Great to finally hear Martin. Love to the team.
#SaveKris

*"Dwankie" Dave Carden,
via EMAIL*

It's nice to know we still have some listeners out there after our long radio silence! We know you are very loyal to our podcast so to know that instead of cheating on us, you engaged in self-pod-love is heartwarming. We wish you hairy fellas all the best in your podcasting adventures! Just don't be too good, you'll be stealing all of our listeners!

The trailers are looking very promising so let's all hope we make it that far! That's a nice theory for the JURASSIC future movies, a lovely bit of apocalyptic dino-chomping instead of zombie-chomping for a change! Perhaps Kris will return from the Phantom Zone and save the human race!
#SaviorKris

PONY EXPRESS

Thank you for publishing and replying to my letter. Sorry to hear that you have had a bad experience with the Brony fandom, there are some strange ones out there. Most of us are entirely friendly and not like that.

Keep on Keeping On,
Robert Rope, via EMAIL

Nay problemo. You seem a nice enough chap Robert, certainly at least 20% cooler than those other Bronies we encountered. Check out page 114 of this issue, we've reviewed a MY LITTLE PONY comic, and it's favourable!

But just as you had convinced us that Bronies aren't oddballs after all, we received this rather mind altering email from one of our writers who wishes to remain nameless...

RAINBLOW DASH

Regarding your recent Brony fandom letter in Issue 409. Said fans might be interested in this product which has just been released. *shudder*

Disturbed, via EMAIL



ARRRRGGGGHHH!!! Talk about Mail order Bridles! These bootleg "SEXY INFLATABLE GIRL PONY DOLLS" are being made in China and can be yours for the mere (or would that be mare) price of \$599, or less if you bulk buy! She's 5 ft 9, and made of PVC. Easy to clean! Hubba Hubba...! Erm... I mean... friendship is magic!

twitter

@STARBURST_MAG

ON MARTYRS REMAKE MOVING FORWARD:

@HorrorSmith
No! No! No!

@rabidrabbie

Will be turned into a soulless found-footage, jump scare pile of shite. they don't have the balls to go all out, like Laugier.

ON GHOSTBUSTERS REBOOT CAST:

@jpep37

This reboot is the worst idea since the captain of the Titanic said "no let's get closer to the iceberg"



THINGS TO COME

A ROUND-UP OF THE
BEST (AND WORST)
OF THIS MONTH'S
MOVIE / TV NEWS



As well as dropping this atmospheric if uninspiring poster, the trailer for the upcoming reboot of Tobe Hooper's 1982 classic did silence a few of the naysayers. Yes, it's still unnecessary, but at least it looked like it might be entertaining, and when has Sam Rockwell been anything less than watchable? We'll find out on July 31st.

PASSENGERS

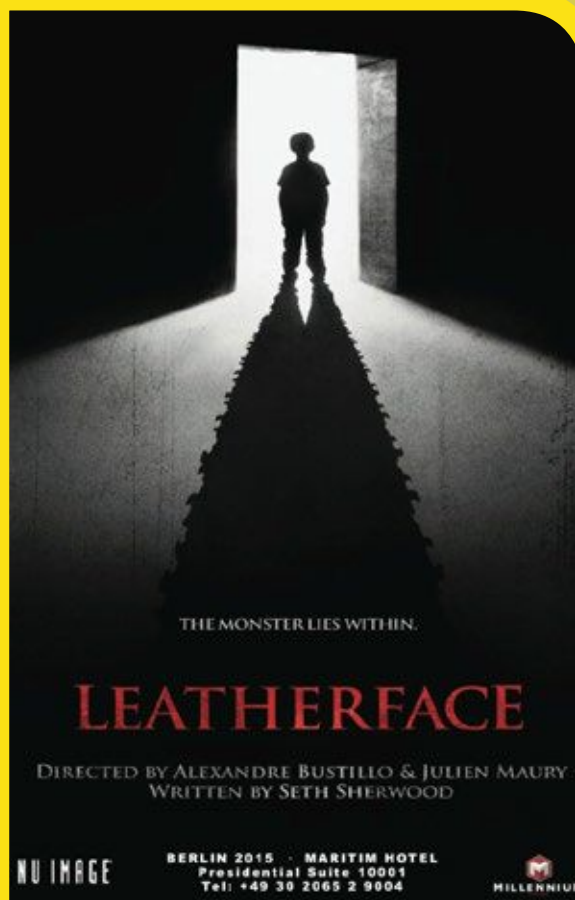
Sony Pictures are moving forward on their production of the Jon (Doctor Strange) Spaihts script **Passengers**, following a furious bidding war for the rights last December. Morten Tyldum (**The Imitation Game**) is on board to direct, with the current front-runners for the leads being Jennifer Lawrence and the ubiquitous Chris Pratt. Should these be confirmed, it would certainly put the film firmly back within the sights of sci-fi fans.

ASTRO BOY

Despite the flop 2009 film, the classic Japanese character **Astro Boy** is heading back to the big screen, this time from the animation and effects studio behind **The Lego Movie**. Animal Logic is still seeking screenwriters for the adaptation for the new version of the robot, originally created in 1951 by Osamu Tezuka and the subject of cartoons, comics and such but this time they are planning it as a live-action affair, 'in the same league as an **Iron Man**'.

THE HUNGER GAMES

With **The Hunger Games** series set to come to an end this November, it appears Lionsgate's investors are getting edgy about where the next money-spinner will come from. This has led the company to hint at looking into developing 'prequel and sequel possibilities' for the franchise following the second part of **Mockingjay**. **The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2** will be released in IMAX 3D on November 20th.



We are once again going back to the beginning with this upcoming reboot/prequel (let's not get bogged down in that again), after the financially successful but critically panned **Texas Chainsaw 3D** looked to show the franchise might have reached its limit. **Leatherface**, as the title suggests, looks at the series' portly, child-minded, serial killer and (as this poster insinuates) will once again be showing his childhood roots (hopefully more effectively than Platinum Dunes' rather repulsive **Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning** did back in 2006). For all of you eye-rollers out there, it may indeed be overkill but some promise might be found in the fact that directors Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo, who directed revered slasher **À l'intérieur (Inside)** are behind the camera. | JB

MARVEL

Over in Disney's MCU, Anthony Russo has confirmed that Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow will be a part of **Captain America: Civil War**. Paul Bettany has also mentioned how there are plans for The Vision, set to debut in **Avengers: Age of Ultron**, to appear in future Marvel Studios efforts, with speculation suggesting him to appear in **Cap 3**. Captain America, Iron Man, Black Panther, Winter Soldier and likely Hawkeye and The Falcon will be appearing in the Russo Brothers' **Captain America: Civil War**, which will hit screens on May 6th, 2016. That film will begin shooting in this coming April.

Whilst we're hugely looking forward to **Cap 3**, the biggest Marvel news by far this month involves Spider-Man. After years of speculation and about 6 months of solid rumour, finally the amazing (no pun intended) news broke, as we were literally about to go to print, that everyone's favourite Wallcrawler is going to become part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The spectacular (okay, that one was maybe meant) announcement from Sony Pictures Entertainment and Marvel Studios revealed that Spidey will appear in an unconfirmed MCU movie before getting his own film on July 28th, 2017. The solo Webhead movie will be released through Sony Pictures, who will continue to finance, distribute, and have creative control over any Spidey films. And with this superior (okay, definitely trying too hard on that pun) news, it's also said that MCU characters will as such appear in future solo Spider-Man films. As for Peter Parker himself, it's currently believed that Andrew Garfield will not be back as Marvel's most famous hero. Instead, a new Spider-Man will be cast. With Spidey set to debut in an unspecified MCU film before he gets his own solo outing, that's where the speculation now comes into place as to just where he will pop up. The logical choice, and the one long speculated, was that Spider-Man would appear in **Captain America: Civil War** given how Cap, Iron Man and Spider-Man are the three key components of the **Civil War** comic book arc. There was then talk that a deal couldn't be done in time and so Spidey would be held off until the first part of **Avengers: Infinity War** in 2018, although given his solo film is planned for 2017, that pretty much rules out an **Infinity War** debut. Chances are, if everything can be put into place before the April start, we'll see Spider-Man making his MCU bow in **Cap 3**. The big thing about that is that it leaves Marvel Studios with just a few months to cast their Spider-Man. Additionally, this news has also seen some other MCU films pushed back (which given that this is to accommodate Spider-freakin'-Man is fully understandable) as **Thor: Ragnarok**'s global release has shifted from July 28th, 2017 to November 3rd, 2017, **Black Panther** has moved from November 3rd, 2017 to July 6th, 2018, **Captain Marvel** to November 2nd, 2018, and **Inhumans** way back to July 12th, 2019. As for Sony's planned **The Amazing Spider-Man 3**, **The Amazing Spider-Man 4**, and **The Sinister Six**, it seems as if they're all to be scrapped, although the **Venom** standalone film could still happen in some form.

With this last month having seen the first teaser trailer debut for Marvel's **Daredevil**, there's been plenty of other happenings on another Netflix-exclusive show. **A.K.A. Jessica Jones** has brought in several new cast members. David Tennant will be playing Kilgrave, better known as the villainous Purple Man, who has the power to enforce his will on others. Joining the former Doctor is **Transformers'** Rachael Taylor as Patsy Walker, also known as the hero Hellcat, and **The Matrix's** Carrie-Anne Moss will be playing a no-nonsense ally of Krysten Ritter's Jones known as Harper. Also featuring Mike Colter as Luke Cage, **A.K.A. Jessica Jones** will debut towards the end of the year, with **Daredevil** debuting on April 10th. Those two shows will be followed by **Luke Cage**, **Iron Fist** and the crossover **Defenders** mini-series.

Elsewhere, Marvel's **Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.** has brought in **Battlestar Galactica** alumni Edward James Olmos to play a new character called Robert Gonzales, described as someone whose arrival will have "Massive repercussions for Director Coulson and his team." **Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.** returns from its mid-season break in March for US viewers, with its UK return expected to follow shortly after.

On the 20th Century Fox Marvel front, Bryan Singer's **X-Men: Apocalypse** has found its young Jean Grey, Scott Summers and Ororo Munroe. **Game of Thrones'** Sophie Turner will be playing Jean, **Mud's** Tye Sheridan will be playing Cyclops, and, err, **Aaliyah:**

The Princess of R&B's Alexandra Shipp will be playing Storm. It's also been confirmed that Rose Byrne will be reprising her **X-Men: First Class** role as Moira MacTaggart, whilst Patrick Stewart has revealed that he and Ian McKellen will not be appearing in this latest X-adventure. **X-Men: Apocalypse** is currently set for a May 27th, 2016 release.

In some small screen X-news, the previously planned **X-Men** series seems to be edging closer with FOX now awaiting clearance from Marvel Entertainment to develop the show. 24's Evan Katz and Manny Coto are in talks to oversee the show, whilst Patrick McKay and J.D. Payne will be penning the pilot episode and serving as showrunners on the show.

Finally, to give brief mention to the Marvel comic book world, this month has seen the announcement of an all-female Avengers team dubbed A-Force. Marvel's **Secret Wars** event is on the horizon for this summer and that will essentially see a huge change and even end for certain quarters of the Marvel Universe. To be co-written by G. Willow Wilson and Margaurite Bennet, complete with art by Jorge Molina, **A-Force** will see the likes of She-Hulk, Dazzler, Nico Minoru, and Medusa forming a female-centred Avengers team. Not only that, some new characters have been created for the line-up, including a cosmically powered heroine called Singularity who has been likened to **Star Trek: The Next Generation's** Q.

But to conclude, the biggest news of this month is that Sony's previous Spider-Man plans are being scrapped, meaning that we definitely will not be seeing that awful idea of a solo May Parker movie come to fruition. Excelsior, True Believers!

TERMINATOR: GENISYS



Another month, another new **Terminator: Genisys** poster. This time, an actually impressive look at Arnie himself, and a neat play on the traditional 'half face' image, and a twist on 'that' catchphrase. With the teaser screened during the American 'Super' Bowl thing, the buzz around the movie is heating up. We shall find out if we're going to be disappointed on July 2nd.

MELISSA BENOIST



DC

The biggest cinematic news for DC this month saw Tom Hardy depart David Ayer's **Suicide Squad**. Hardy was on board to play Rick Flag(g) but left the project due to what is believed to be some unhappiness with the script and the fact that the character's role has been reduced in order to focus more attention of Jared Leto's Joker and Will Smith's Deadshot. Flag is set to be depicted as a government official who is overseeing the Task Force X project headed up by Viola Davis' Amanda Waller. Jake Gyllenhaal, who has worked with director Ayer on **End of Watch**, was apparently lined up by Warner Brothers to replace Hardy, although he has passed on the project. The currently Rick Flag-less **Suicide Squad** is scheduled for an August 5th, 2016 release.

Before **Suicide Squad** comes Zack Snyder's **Batman V Superman**. A leaked image surfaced this month that suggested the film was being broken into two parts, with **Batman V Superman: Enter the Knight** hitting on October 23rd this year and then **Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice** in the already-announced March 25th, 2016 spot. A two-part **Bats V Supes** tale has been played down and the leaked image seems to be some form of hoax at this stage. Still, what if...

Debuting in **Batman V Superman** will be Jason Momoa's Aquaman. This last month has seen speculation appear that says Warner Brothers is lining up Karl Urban to play the villain when the King of Atlantis takes centre-stage in 2018's **Aquaman**. The studio is prepared to wait for Urban to get **Star Trek 3** out of the way first and they're keen to work with the actor after nearly casting him as Batman in previous years. As for a director for the Aquaman solo movie, **300: Rise of an Empire**'s Noam Murro and **Mud**'s Jeff Nichols are said to be the current frontrunners, although Murro is believed to have the edge having worked with Zack Snyder on the **300** sequel. Snyder is an integral part of the DC Cinematic Universe, essentially serving as Warner Brothers' version of Joss Whedon.

Whereas the big screen has Henry Cavill as its Man of Steel, Superman's cousin has been cast for CBS' **Supergirl**. **Whiplash**'s Melissa Benoist has beaten out competition from Claire Holt and Elizabeth Lail for the gig. The show has also found its Jimmy Olsen, with **True Blood**'s Mehcad Brooks to play a far more rugged and suave-looking version of Jimmy, who could also end up being a love interest for Benoist's Kara Zor-El. In a surprising move, Lumberjack will be the villain of the **Supergirl** pilot, although he'll be working for a higher power. What's surprising is that Lumberjack is literally the most random villain that could've been chosen, having made only one solitary comic book appearance way back in **Wonder Woman #268**.

Switching over to the Dark Knight's domain, FOX's **Gotham** has been renewed for a second season. One new addition to the show this month is **The Amazing Spider-Man 2**'s Colm Feore as the show's take on the Dollmaker character, last seen in live-action played superbly by Michael Eklund in arguably the very best episode of The CW's **Arrow**. As well as Feore, **Gotham** has also added **Heroes**' Milo Ventimiglia as a supposedly "all-new character for the series" that just so happens to share the name of Jason Lennon, aka DC's Ogre. Additionally, the show has confirmed that the Red Hood will appear in the future, although that role has not been cast yet. What's most interesting about this news, of course, is that the Red Hood is an alias that The Joker goes by during his early days in many depictions of the Clown Prince of Crime's origin story.

As well as **Gotham**, The CW's **Arrow** and **The Flash** have both been confirmed for new seasons, meaning **Arrow** will get a Season

4 and **The Flash** will get a Season 2. In further news on the two shared-universe shows, the network has revealed that the two titular heroes will have a crossover event each November after the recent two-part team-up was so well received. CW President Mark Pedowitz has also revealed how there's been "preliminary discussions" over giving Brandon Routh's Ray Palmer his own Atom spin-off show. Coincidentally, this month saw the first official image released of Routh suited-up as The Atom, a moniker that he is set to take on during the second half of **Arrow**'s Season 3. Switching attention to **The Flash**, **Dexter**'s Devon Graye has been added as Axel Walker, aka The Trickster. Mark Hamill has already been confirmed to be reprising his 1990s **Flash** role of James Jesse, aka the original Trickster, in an upcoming episode, and Jesse will be working with Barry Allen and Joe West to take down Axel's new Trickster. The duo of Tricksters will appear in Episode 17 of **The Flash**'s current season. And yes, it's finally been revealed that the Scarlet Speedster show will indeed feature time travel in a big way.

One DC-based TV show that hasn't been faring so well as of late is NBC's **Constantine**, with speculation mounting that the Matt Ryan-starrer may not make it to a second season. Despite receiving a widely positive response from fans, the show's ratings have constantly fallen below what the network is looking for, meaning that if **Constantine** does have a future then it will likely have to find a new home.

On new shows on the horizon, the live-action Teen Titans show, called simply **Titans**, has revealed what line-up of the team we'll be seeing. Dick Grayson will be leading the charge, joined by Barbara Gordon, Hawk, Dove, Raven, and Starfire. Notable omissions from popular Titans line-ups are Beast Boy and Cyborg, although it's understandable in Cyborg's case as he's to be involved in the DC Cinematic Universe. It's also interesting to see Barbara Gordon involved seeing as how she's never been a Teen Titans member. In the show, Barbara will be wheelchair-bound but will not have the Oracle moniker at this point. As for Dick, he will begin the pilot as Robin but progress to Nightwing by the episode's close, with him known as Nightwing from then on out.

Finally, Vixen is getting her own animated series for CW Seed which will actually tie to the world shared by Grant Gustin's Flash and Stephen Amell's Arrow. In fact, those two heroes will also make appearances in the show from time to time. For those not familiar with Vixen, her main ability is that she can mimic animals.

AND FINALLY...

Jason Momoa (**Game of Thrones**) is in talks for the lead in **The Bad Batch**, a film being described as 'a dystopian love story of a cannibal and his food'. It's the next production from Ana Lily Amirpour, the writer/director of the acclaimed festival hit **A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night**. Consider us very interested...

+++

The American remake of French extreme classic **Martyrs** is back on the cards. This time with **Scenic Route**'s The Goetz Brothers, Kevin and Michael, on board as directors. Quite whether the film will live up to the claim of being 'The Ultimate Horror Movie' when they haven't shot a second of footage remains to be seen...

+++

With another idea to file under 'Please Don't', Mel Brooks has hinted that with the excitement about the forthcoming **Star Wars** film he may well be tempted to go back to the well with **Spaceballs 2**. He did admit that it may 'fall on its ass and not make its money back' but would do well on the first weekend. Really?

+++

As internet rumours go, the one about man of the moment Chris Pratt being eyed as a replacement for Harrison Ford in any upcoming **Indiana Jones** movies certainly divided opinion. The man himself has responded to the talk by saying the role would be an 'awesome opportunity'. Stranger things have happened...

+++

After being a smash hit at the box office (more than \$200 million at the time of writing), StudioCanal have confirmed there are plans for a sequel to **Paddington**. Director Paul King hopes that they will be able to use more from author Michael Bond's original novels for any future films. Pass the marmalade [sandwich]...

"WEIRD, FUNNY AND PERFECTLY PITCHED"

The Playlist



Heat



Entertainment Weekly



Little White Lies

Ryan
REYNOLDS

Gemma
ARTERTON

Anna
KENDRICK

The **VOICES**

A FILM BY MARJANE SATRAPI

*If you hear them
You're losing your head*

1984 PRIVATE DEFENSE CONTRACTORS PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH PANORAMA MEDIA, A MANDALAY VISION PRODUCTION
A STUDIO BABELSBERG AND VERTIGO ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION A FILM BY MARJANE SATRAPI RYAN REYNOLDS "THE VOICES"
GEMMA ARTERTON ANNA KENDRICK JACKI WEAVER COSTUME DESIGNER MARY VERNIEU CSA AND VENUS KANANI CSA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY OLIVIER BERNET
VISUAL EFFECTS ANTOINE MARGACH DAMIEN STUMPF MANFRED BUTTNER COSTUME DESIGNER BETTINA HELM EDITOR STEPHANE ROACHE PRODUCTION DESIGNER UDO KRAMER
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHRISTOPH FISHER HENNING MOLTENIER ELIKA PORTNOY CHARLIE WOLCKEN
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MAXIME ALEXANDRE PRODUCED BY CATHY SCHULMAN ADAM STONE JOHN POWERS MIDDLETON DOUGLAS SAYLOR JR. PRODUCED BY MATTHEW RHODES, P.G.A.
WRITTEN BY MICHAEL R. PERRY DIRECTED BY MARJANE SATRAPI



IN CINEMAS MARCH 20

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BY
HAYDEN
MEARS

LINE OF SUCCESSION



STARBURST LOOKS BACK OVER THE STORY SO FAR OF TV'S MOST SPECTACULAR SAGA TO BRING YOU UP TO DATE WITH THE HAPPENINGS AHEAD OF SEASON FIVE. WARNING: MAJOR SPOILERS FOR GAME OF THRONES FOLLOW...!

Since it first graced television screens in spring 2011, HBO's *Game of Thrones* has earned its spot among the most popular, most beloved shows on the planet. Seamlessly meshing a myriad of captivating character arcs into one brilliantly conceived storyline, the show's layered narrative packs itself tight with enough political intrigue, horrifying violence, and graphic nudity to keep even the most cynical of viewers glued to their TV screens. But we're pretty sure the sex is the main selling point here...

Superb storytelling aside, *Game of Thrones*' reputation for mercilessly and unceremoniously killing off many of its key players may be the most famous thing about it. The show's fourth season saw the demise of several key characters, and it promises even more sex and carnage in its upcoming fifth season.

Given its complex, involved nature, *Game of Thrones* is a show best revisited before the arrival of a new season. The intricate web of characters, arcs, and themes becomes overwhelming for the unaware or the unfamiliar, so we decided to jump back to square one and follow the story from its chilling series opener all the way to the heart-stopping finale of Season Four.

Trust us, you'll enjoy yourself. And, if anything, you'll probably be itching for another rewatch by the time we're done here.

SEASON 1

Winter has fallen upon Westeros, gripping the northern reaches of that cursed country with icy fingers. Eddard "Ned" Stark, Lord of Winterfell, finds himself caught between nobility and mercy when a young member of the Night's Watch abandons his post after a vicious attack by undead beings known only as "White Walkers." Realising what must be done, Ned beheads the unfortunate youngster as his sons look on, later explaining that the boy broke an oath when he abandoned his post.

An expedition into the woods leads to an encounter with a litter of abandoned direwolf pups, whose numbers match those of the Stark children (his sons Jon Snow, Robb Stark, Bran Stark, and two younger daughters, Sansa and Arya). Each Stark child takes one of the pups and calls it their own.

At King's Landing, Jaime Lannister (also called "the Kingslayer") and his sister, Queen Cersei Lannister, gaze upon the corpse of Jon Arryn, the recently deceased Hand of the King. News of Arryn's death quickly spreads, prompting King Robert Baratheon, Cersei, her bastard son Joffrey (whom she had incestuously with Jaime), his younger siblings Tommen and Myrcella, and Cersei's younger brother, Tyrion Lannister, to visit Winterfell personally. Upon their arrival, King Robert appoints Ned as the new Hand of the King. Across the Narrow Sea, in Essos, Daenerys and her older brother Viserys, of the

exiled House Targaryen, plot their return to power. Viserys arranges for his sister to wed Khal Drogo, leader of the nomadic people known as the Dothraki. Her wedding gifts are an old book given to her by exiled warrior Jorah Mormont and three dragon eggs from Illyrio Mopatis.

Bran, a skilled climber, decides to scale one of Winterfell's towers. Upon reaching the top, he discovers Cersei and Jaime having sex. Without warning, Bran is pushed from his precarious perch by Jaime, who doesn't want his incestuous relationship with Cersei to become public.

Bran survives his tumble from the tower, but is left crippled by the incident. Cersei, still insistent that no one finds out about her scandalous affair, sends assassins to finish off the broken child. All fail, and Bran eventually awakens, saddened by his inability to walk.

Ned, Sansa, and Arya travel to King's Landing so that Ned can assume his duty as Hand of the King. During the journey, Arya and Joffrey butt heads after a disagreement regarding her direwolf Nymeria, forcing the young Stark girl to chase her wolf away to save its life. King Robert, under pressure from Cersei, orders Sansa's wolf, Lady, to be killed in Nymeria's place. Ned, heartbroken, takes it upon himself to kill the wolf, claiming it's his responsibility.

The Starks arrive at King's Landing with King Robert, Cersei, and the others, where Ned acclimates to his new position and starts to investigate the mysterious circumstances surrounding Jon Arryn's demise. Arya



insists on being trained as a swordsman by Syrio Forel, while Sansa continues to pursue Joffrey. On a hunting trip, a wild boar injures King Robert and he dies after several days of agony, passing his title of king onto Joffrey. Jon Snow, Ned's bastard son, joins the Night's Watch atop the Wall (a literal wall of ice that stands hundreds of feet tall) with his uncle Benjen and Tyrion, who leaves soon after arriving and returns to King's Landing. Jon meets Samwell (Sam) Tarly, a chunky, underestimated fellow with a big heart and tons to prove.

After some time, Daenerys begins to warm to Drogo and his Dothraki brethren, and soon becomes pregnant. Viserys, angry that things aren't playing out the way he wants, threatens his sister in front of Drogo, Jorah, and a number of Dothraki warriors. Eager to give Viserys his 'crown', Drogo has two of his men hold the prince down while they pour molten gold on his head. The gold quickly burns through his head, killing him in seconds.

Following a fight with enemy raiders, Khal Drogo dies from an infected wound he received during the battle. Unfortunately, an attempt to save Drogo's life using the blood magic is unsuccessful due to a double-crossing witch results in the death of Daenerys' unborn son.

After uncovering Cersei and Jaime's scandalous affair, Ned is thrown into jail and sentenced to die. Joffrey agrees to spare Ned if he admits Joffrey's right to be king.

Despite the negotiations taking place for Ned's life, Joffrey decides to have him killed anyway. A heartbroken Arya slips

away as Ned is beheaded before a large crowd at King's Landing.

Daenerys' dragons finally hatch in Drogo's funeral pyre, and she becomes known as the Mother of Dragons.

KEY EVENTS: The re-emergence of the White Walkers. The death of Robert Baratheon. The decapitation of Eddard Stark. The death of Viserys Targaryen.

SEASON 2

As Westeros reels from the deaths of King Robert and, more recently, Ned Stark, matters between the forces vying for the Iron Throne become much more complicated and deadly.

Tyrion arrives at King's Landing with his friend Bronn, a skilled swordsman, to handle the rapidly escalating situation.

Meanwhile, Catelyn Stark and Theon Greyjoy set off to curry favor with Renly Baratheon and Balon Greyjoy, respectively. Robb keeps winning battles and making a name for himself as a capable young leader, causing uneasiness amongst the higher-ups over at King's Landing. Along the way, he falls in love with a healer named Talisa and decides to break a previous vow to marry a woman of House Frey. Jaime remains Robb's prisoner, having finally been exposed as Bran's attempted murderer.

Bran begins to develop special abilities that allow him to dream about and embody other people and situations. His dreams often prove eerily accurate, but he keeps them a secret.

Stannis Baratheon declares that he is the rightful ruler of Westeros and stakes his claim in the battle for the Iron Throne, refusing to join with Robb Stark or any of the other armies. His advisor, the dangerous Melisandre, claims to have been blessed with extraordinary powers.

As night falls at Renly's camp, Melisandre sends a shadowy assassin into the king's tent and has him murdered. His bodyguard, the tall, stocky Brienne of Tarth, mourns his death and, upon questioning, swears she had nothing to do with it. Urged by Catelyn to leave the camp, Brienne obeys and swears her loyalty to Catelyn.

Theon Greyjoy seizes Winterfell and holds the Starks prisoner until the Wildling woman Osha helps them and the simple but gentle giant Hodor escape.

Arya, shortly after escaping King's Landing, befriends Gendry, who is later revealed to actually be the bastard son of the late Robert Baratheon. The two of them, along with Arya's friend Hot Pie, are taken to the ancient castle of Harrenhal, which is being used by Lannister soldiers for murder and torture. Arya meets the mysterious Jaqen H'ghar, whom she rescued from Lannister men days earlier. He returns the favour by offering his help whenever she requests it and eventually helps her and her friends escape Harrenhal.

The Battle of the Blackwater rages on into the night, spreading fiery ruin upon the corpse-choked shores of King's Landing. Stannis and his forces close in on their trapped foes, ready to deal the killing blow when Tywin Lannister and his men



launch a surprise attack upon their not-so-triumphant assailants. The Lannister forces drive off Stannis' fleet, winning the battle and sending Stannis scurrying away in defeat. Tyrion is badly wounded during the fight, but is saved by his loyal squire, Podrick Payne. The Hound, formerly loyal to the Lannisters, also flees the capital.

Further north, Jon Snow captures a Wildling woman named Ygritte and opts to take her back to his brothers of the Night's Watch. However, he quickly falls into a Wildling trap, and is captured himself. To test his mettle and his loyalty, his captors force him to fight and kill his recently captured Night's Watch brother, Qhorin Halfhand.

Jaime, having been secretly released by Catelyn in hopes that his freedom would lead to the return of her daughters, travels with Brienne to King's Landing.

Sam Tarly witnesses an army of White Walkers approaching the Wall, while hiding behind a large boulder to avoid detection and save his own life.

KEY EVENTS: The Battle of the Blackwater. Renly Baratheon's demise. The release of Jaime Lannister.

SEASON 3

Jaime and Brienne continue their trek back to King's Landing, eventually running into a troop of Bolton men led by the cunning Locke. Locke captures both and savagely slices off Jaime's sword hand.

Across the Narrow Sea, in Essos, Daenerys continues her own quest for power. After an assassination attempt, she encounters

Ser Barristan Selmy, one of the most dangerous and most respected warriors in Westeros. Selmy recently abandoned Joffrey and denounced his rule before heading east to find the lost Targaryens.

Meanwhile, the bastard son of Roose Bolton, Ramsay Snow, has captured, tortured, and maimed (in the most emasculating way) Theon Greyjoy.

Bran meets Jojen Reed, who, along with his sister Meera, decides to accompany Bran on his quest to the source of his dreams, which continue to haunt him.

Arya, Hot Pie, and Genry, having escaped Harrenhal, run into the Brotherhood Without Banners and its leader, Beric Dondarrion. Melisandre shows up and takes Gendry with her, revealing to him that he is, in actuality, the son of Robert Baratheon.

Beric challenges the Hound (also found by the Brotherhood) to a trial by fire. Arya instantly recognises him and calls for his death as retribution for his crimes committed in the name of the Lannisters.

At Craster's Keep, the men of the Night's Watch grow weary of their host's lack of hospitality and begin to voice their disgust at his piggish behavior. A quick fireside exchange quickly turns into a full-on brawl, resulting in the deaths of both Craster and the well-meaning Lord Commander Jeor Mormont. Sam Tarly escapes with Gilly, one of Craster's young wives, and her newborn baby.

Daenerys needs an army, so she promises the rulers of the city of Astapor one of her

dragons if they turn over command of their Unsullied soldiers. They agree, but before the exchange can occur, the determined young queen retracts her promise and has the masters killed by their former slaves. With her dragons careening in the sky above, she marches away with her new army.

Brienne and Jaime are brought to Harrenhal, where they gain a mutual respect for each other. Later, Jaime heads back to King's Landing while Brienne remains a prisoner of Bolton. He doesn't get far before turning back and rescuing her from a bear pit, where she's been put for sport. The two then depart for King's Landing.

Daenerys meets Daario Naharis, a commander of the Second Sons, who immediately makes his attraction to the young queen known. The other commanders angrily challenge his opinions, but he kills them both before they can even raise their swords to defend themselves.

Sam and Gilly approach the Wall, but are stopped short when a White Walker attacks their camp, presumably to steal Gilly's baby. An enraged Sam kills the White Walker with his dragonglass dagger, saving Gilly, her baby, and allowing them to continue northward to Castle Black.

Jon Snow and the Wildlings Ygritte, Orell, and Tormund scale the Wall as part of their quest to take Castle Black. Jon flees his Wildling captors shortly after fighting and killing Orell and several Wildling soldiers, unaware that Bran, Rickon, Osha, Hodor, as well as Jojen and Meera Reed remain hidden in a nearby tower. As Jon makes off on horseback, Ygritte puts an arrow in him,



wounding him. Shortly after, Osha takes Rickon away to protect him.

In Essos, Daario Naharis, Jorah Mormont, and the Unsullied captain, Grey Worm, infiltrate Yunkai, overpowering the guards and taking the city for their Queen.

Following a falling out with his Karstark allies, Robb finds himself in desperate need of men. He decides to seek the help of Lord Frey, whom he fears may not take kindly to the promise he broke when he married and impregnated Talisa. Robb and his army of Northerners arrive at the Twins, where Lord Walder Frey feigns forgiveness for Robb's slight against his family. That same night, a wedding ceremony turns sour when Frey men bolt the doors to the dining hall and begin slaughtering Robb's troops. Robb, Talisa, and Catelyn are all killed in the fray (*sorry, we had to*), marking the end of the North's claim to the Iron Throne.

Arya and Sandor (the Hound) slip into a camp outside the Twins just as the slaughtering begins, having arrived to deliver Arya back to her mother and brother. Arya witnesses her brother's direwolf, Grey Wind, take several crossbow bolts to the head before being knocked unconscious by Sandor, who then carries her to safety.

In the days following the massacre, Frey soldiers fix Grey Wind's severed head to Robb's headless corpse and parade it around their camp.

Roose Bolton, who delivered the blow that killed Robb, is handsomely rewarded for his heinous act.

KEY EVENTS: The murders of Jeor Mormont and Craster. Sandor Clegane's trial by fire in the cave. The murders of Robb Stark, Grey Wind, Talisa, and Catelyn Stark. Danaerys's freeing of the Unsullied. Osha's departure with Rickon.

SEASON 4

As news of Robb's death continues to spread across Westeros, matters at King's Landing grow tenser by the minute. As King Joffrey's wedding day approaches, Prince Oberyn Martell of Dorne arrives in the city with vengeful intentions, informing Tyrion of his mission to avenge his slain sister.

Arya and Sandor 'the Hound' Clegane continue their trek, arriving at an inn currently being occupied by Lannister soldiers. Arya recognises one of the men as Polliver, the man who murdered her friend Lommy and stole her sword, Needle. The Hound and Arya enter the inn, sparking a confrontation that results in them killing the Lannister troops, and reuniting a sword and its owner.

Nuptials often prove deadly in wild, wild Westeros, and King Joffrey's wedding, thankfully, is no exception. After yet another bout of scathing insults and mockery directed toward Tyrion, Joffrey succumbs to a rare poison in his wine and dies in Cersei's arms. As he takes one final, shuddering breath, Joffrey points at Tyrion, prompting several guards to carry him away.

Amidst the chaos, Ser Dontos urges Sansa to leave King's Landing, as she will undoubtedly be wrongly linked to Joffrey's murder. They escape into

Blackwater Bay, where Dontos delivers Sansa to a lurking Littlefinger. Satisfied that Dontos fulfilled his end of the bargain, Littlefinger has him shot dead in his small boat and sails away with a horrified Sansa in tow. Littlefinger admits his involvement in Joffrey's assassination and tells Sansa that he's taking her to her aunt Lysa in the Vale.

Daenerys frees the people of Meereen, a city long known for its slavery and oppression. Jorah Mormont, Barristan Selmy, and Daario Naharis serve as her advisors while Missandei grows accustomed to her role as translator.

Karl and the other Night's Watch mutineers remain holed up at Craster's Keep, drinking from their slain host's wine storage and mistreating his countless wives. Jon, Locke, and several men of the Night's Watch take off to kill the mutineers and avenge their murdered Lord Commander, unaware that Bran, Meera Reed, Jojen Reed, and Hodor were taken prisoner there just days before.

As Jon and his followers kill the mutineers, Locke sneaks away with Bran in tow. However, a possessed Hodor intercepts Locke and snaps his neck, thus foiling the hidden traitor's attempt to deliver Bran back to Roose Bolton at Harrenhal.

Littlefinger (formally named Petyr Baelish) and Sansa arrive at the Eyrie to greet Sansa's batshit crazy aunt, Lysa. Eager to marry Littlefinger, with whom she'd had an intimate relationship for some time, Lysa hurriedly cobbles together a wedding. However, Littlefinger later tells



Sansa that she reminds him of her mother Catelyn, and kisses her in a snow-draped courtyard. A wrathful Lyanna looks upon the scene from nearby before storming off. Lyanna calls Sansa to her tower, holding her over the menacing Moon Door (a hole in the floor that overlooks the rocky terrain surrounding the Eyrie) and threatening to push her through. Littlefinger arrives just in time, assuring Lyanna that he never really loved her before shoving her through the Moon Door to her death.

Daenerys discovers a spy in her midst, and becomes outraged when the traitor's identity is revealed. She calls Jorah Mormont to her, asking him why he would betray her trust and claim to love her the way he always did. He implores her to hear him out; that he no longer served as a spy for the Lannisters.

Tyion's trial by combat arrives, with Oberyn Martell stepping in as his vengeful understudy. The Mountain (Sandor Clegane's bigger, stronger brother Gregor) and his smaller, quicker, adversary battle it out before the crowd, who watch as Tyion's fate is decided. Oberyn mortally wounds the Mountain, but before he can finish him off, he is swept off his feet and brutally crushed by his dying opponent. The Mountain succumbs to his wounds and collapses beside his dead foe. Tyion, stunned, receives his grim sentence and awaits his execution.

Jon Snow, Sam Tarly, and the bedraggled brothers of the Night's Watch prepare to defend Castle Black against a Wildling attack, fully aware of how outnumbered

they are. Sure enough, after striking Mole's Town, Tormund, Styr, Ygritte, and their Wildling army attack Castle Black with alacrity; bringing fire and ruin to the seemingly impenetrable castle. After a lengthy battle, Jon manages to bash Styr's skull in with a hammer while Tormund Giantsbane fights and wounds Ser Alliser.

As the battle wraps up, Ygritte briefly contemplates shooting Jon for betraying her, but an arrow pierces her through her back, killing her. Meanwhile, the Night's Watch capture Tormund and throw him in an icy dungeon.

In the aftermath of the battle, Jon decides to go talk with Wildling leader Mance Rayder at his camp outside Castle Black, where another enemy host lies in wait. Stannis, Davos, and an army of Baratheon soldiers arrive in the midst of negotiations and seize Mance. Jon suggests that he be questioned and imprisoned rather than executed, citing his father Ned as the inspiration for his mercy. Shortly after, after a shackled and injured Tormund urges him to bury Ygritte in the North where she belongs, Jon takes his fallen love to the woods and says goodbye.

Bran and company reach the Weirwood, but are ambushed by re-animated corpses that claim Jojen's life. Soon, though, a group of mysterious, gaunt children emerges from the tree and lead Bran, Meera, and Hodor inside. At the heart of the tree sits the Three-Eyed Raven, who informs Bran that he will never walk again. "But you will fly..." he rasps.

As Daenerys continues to treat with the citizens of Meereen, a man is brought before her. Sobbing, he reveals the blackened bones of his young daughter, who he reveals was burned alive by one of her dragons. Heartbroken, Daenerys traps two of her dragons in the catacombs underneath Meereen and requests a search for her missing dragon.

Jaime, realising that no one else will help his brother, enlists the help of Varys to spring Tyrion from jail and hide him on a ship headed east. Before leaving, however, Tyrion stops at Tywin's quarters and discovers his former lover Shae in his bed. Enraged, Tyrion attacks her and, after a brief struggle, strangles her. A strange calm falls over him as he arms himself with a crossbow and confronts his father on the privy. After a quick exchange, he shoots Tywin and escapes alongside Varys on a ship bound for Essos.

After witnessing a vicious confrontation between Brienne and Sandor Clegane that leaves the latter battered, broken, and dying, Arya evades a well-meaning Podrick Payne and flees on a ship to Braavos with the same mysterious coin Jaqen H'ghar gave her...

KEY EVENTS: Arya reclaims her sword, Needle, from Polliver. Tyrion's sentencing, trial, and escape. The Battle of Castle Black. Tywin Lannister's death. Sandor Clegane's ambiguous but likely death. Arya heads to Braavos.



Read our **GAME OF THRONES SEASON FIVE** preview on page 40.

WWW.

ALL THE HEROES

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THE COOLEST SUPERHERO
APPAREL IN ANY UNIVERSE

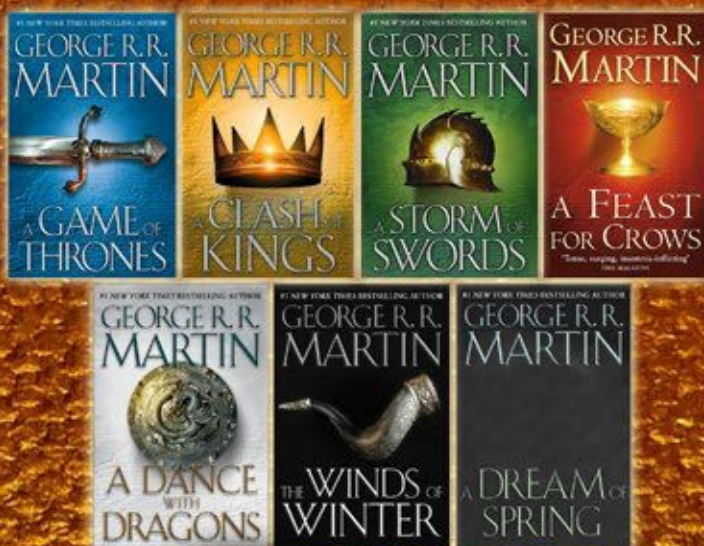


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THE HAND OF THE KING



BY
FORD MADDOX BROWN

It's presumptuous to say, but as STARBURST readers, you've no doubt seen HBO's immensely popular series *Game of Thrones*. If you are one of the minority that haven't (don't be ashamed, you've not missed the bandwagon just yet) you still have time to binge-watch before Season 5 hits our screens in April. If you want to become re-affiliated with the plot in time for Season 5, please read our summary of the story so far on page 12. The TV series takes its inspiration from a mammoth series of novels by American author George R.R. Martin. The 'A Song of Ice and Fire' saga started with *A Game of Thrones* in 1996, the series then went on to be nominated for the prestigious Hugo Award in 2000 for the intensely stirring *A Storm of Swords* (book 3) and has been gaining popularity since its incarnation. Thanks to the viewing numbers of HBO, who bought the rights in 2007, Martin's stories have managed to reach a diverse and substantial audience, but, if you really want to get involved with the politics, complexity and profundity of perhaps the greatest modern fantasy to date, the books are undoubtedly the place to go.

The reason George R.R. Martin's ASOIAF series has been so effective and influential is because it has propagated and lifted a literary genre that has too often been defined and shunned by outsiders as mere unrealistic escapism. Let's face it, there is too much landfill fantasy (available in all good charity shops) that is cliché-ridden and too reliant upon its tall tales of magic, myth and noble heroes. Martin's series prevails because it steers clear from the whimsical worlds of traditional fantasy and instead presents the audience with a harsh, gritty reality where the characters are relatable and morally ambivalent—just like us. The ASOIAF series can be categorised as 'low fantasy' - magic is a factor in the world that Martin has created but ultimately it doesn't drive it. What Martin has managed to achieve through low-fantasy is the creation of a fictional world that is not only appealing because it is so complex and exciting but also because it is so convincing and genuine. All the blood and coitus is left unembellished for us to read... The ethos of this series seems to be- 'If the real world doesn't censor itself, then why should fantasy?'

Right from the start, the prologue of book one, *A Game of Thrones*, starts as it means to continue. By presenting us with unflinching brutality as the band of cloaked men we have just been introduced to proceed to be ripped to shreds by an ominous presence referred to as 'the others'. This sets into motion one of the main narrative threads of the series, an ancient enemy that lurks in the north is set to return. The cruel irony of this narrative thread is that everyone south of the wall (the structure initially built to keep the others away), are too embroiled in their own politics to show too much

consideration to the threat. Other intrinsic plots carry the story too, namely a dynastic civil war for the seven kingdoms of Westeros, and the story of the exiled Daenerys Targaryen, who seeks to return to Westeros and claim the throne that was taken from her family in rebellion. But if you've seen the show already we're sure you're already experts on this!

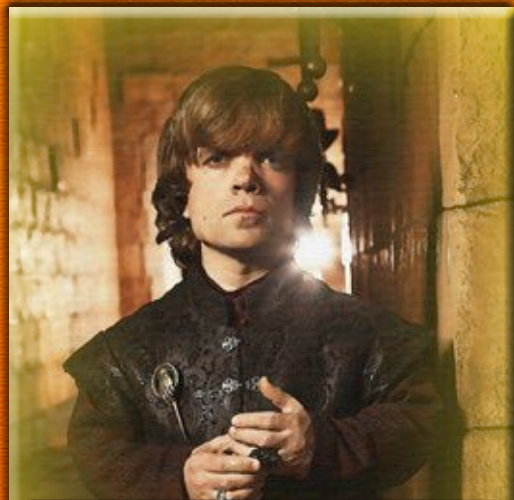
The series is written through a third-person perspective, point-of-view style and this enables Martin to give his characters a real depth. The HBO show is remarkable but if it is guilty of one downfall (despite cutting fan favourites like Strong Belwas and Coldhands) it is that the characters seem either to be inherently good or evil, whereas in the books they are more of an opaque shade of grey. A notable example of this is Petyr Baelish, commonly known as Littlefinger. In the books, Littlefinger is so interesting because of his duplicitousness, he is respected for his place on the small council and position as master of coin and he uses this to his advantage; a prime illustration of this is how he gains the trust of the honourable Ned Stark. In the show though, Baelish is almost a caricature of a cartoon villain! With his deep voice, shifty demeanour and overstated interest in his brothels, the writers may as well have had Littlefinger twirl his moustache every time the character appears on screen.

Fan favourite Tyrion is also a victim of the good/evil divide in the show as his character has been almost totally whitewashed. In the show, Tyrion has been painted as the always compassionate, unlikely hero of Blackwater Bay who can do no wrong. Book Tyrion though is a different character; there is a depth to his character that the show just doesn't hit home with. As a POV character, we are treated to Tyrion's innermost thoughts and it is through the insightful internal monologues that we are shown how scornful and twisted Tyrion truly is because of the way his family have treated him (namely Tywin and Cersei).

Martin's writing talent is also evident in his imagery. From the snowy, vast North that is ruled by the Starks of Winterfell to the Sweltering Southern peninsula of Dorne, seat of House Martell (known by show watchers for eccentric yet loveable Oberyn), Martin's fictional world is so detailed, immersive and varied that the geographical locations are just as important to experience of the books as the characters themselves.

Something that may not be apparent to show watchers is that despite the Baratheons (via the incestuous Lannisters) ruling Westeros from King's Landing, each Kingdom in Westeros is governed by one house, with minor houses/vassals that are sworn to that house. Due to the limited nature of the show, with ten episodes a season, much of this complexity has been cut to focus on the main plots and characters. This is a dire shame as the books have so many minor houses that are just as interesting as the Starks or The Lannisters. Our personal favourites are the Northern House Manderly from White Harbour (for reasons we won't spoil). House Dayne, because of their cool history and House Brax... because their house sigil is a purple unicorn!

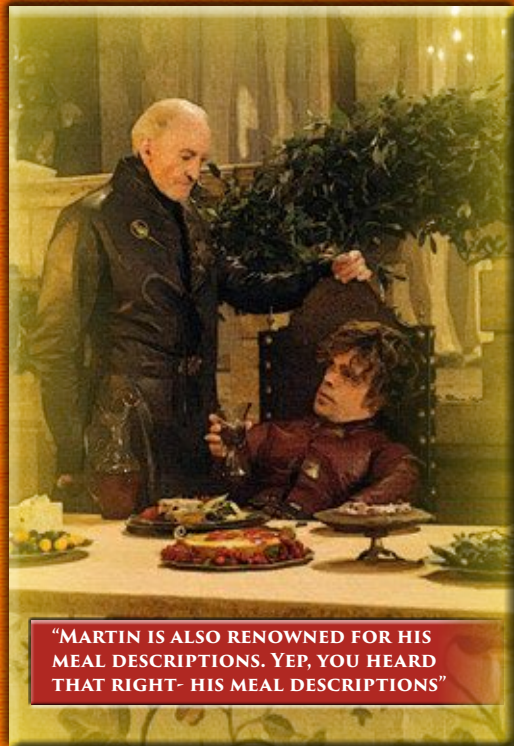
As well as his vivid character and world building, Martin is also renowned for his meal descriptions. Yep, you heard that right- his meal descriptions. Fans of the book series have come to know that GRRM loves to write about food, sometimes for pages at a time... Okay that is perhaps a tad hyperbolic but Martin loves describing meals. To be honest, this only serves to reflect the brilliance of GRRM's expressive writing. With just a meal description, Martin can evoke feelings of grandeur and wealth or disparity and poverty. For example, his depiction of one of the meals Daenerys eats in the first book on her wedding night, *"Horseflesh roasted with honey and peppers, fermented mare's milk, Illyrio's fine wines with steaming joints of meat, thick black sausages and Dothraki blood pies"*. This passage works to reflect the culture of the Dothraki and how Daenerys is being introduced to a vastly different society that she has been used to. This type of intricacy and metaphor cannot properly be translated to television and this is one of the many reasons the books are a must read!



"BOOK TYRION THOUGH IS A DIFFERENT CHARACTER; THERE IS A DEPTH TO HIS CHARACTER THAT THE SHOW JUST DOESN'T HIT HOME WITH"



"IN THE BOOKS LITTLEFINGER IS SO INTERESTING BECAUSE OF HIS DUPLICITOUSNESS"



"MARTIN IS ALSO RENOWNED FOR HIS MEAL DESCRIPTIONS. YEP, YOU HEARD THAT RIGHT- HIS MEAL DESCRIPTIONS"

INFLUENCES- LITERARY AND HISTORICAL

All great writers have their influences and here are some of the factors that helped George R.R. Martin in his crafting of ASOIAF...

LITERARY: The works of J.R.R. Tolkien are perhaps the most regarded and renowned fantasy writings ever published and it is inevitable that Martin, as arguably today's most influential fantasy author, has received comparisons with Tolkien throughout his career. From the structure of the books, which both initially have characters in a tight knit group that go on to disband, to the inclusion of dragons (Ancalagon versus Balerion would be a battle to behold), to the characters that are so defined and intriguing.

Both works also have a vast scope and complexity, with detailed histories and topography spanning years. See Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* or Martin's recently released *The World of Ice and Fire* for reference. Despite being flattered by the comparisons to Tolkien though, Martin has also distanced himself and his story from Middle Earth. One notable example being at the 'Odyssey Con 2008' where Martin asserted, "*Tolkien made the wrong choice when he brought Gandalf back. Screw Gandalf. He had a great death and the characters should have had to go on without him*". The sheer mass of characters that Martin has taken from us has proven he doesn't have too much of an emotional attachment to his literary creations... (The Young Wolf, Robb Stark, being betrayed by that piece of wrinkly shit Walder Frey still haunts our dreams. WHAT ABOUT GUEST RIGHTS DAMNIT?!)

Ahem.

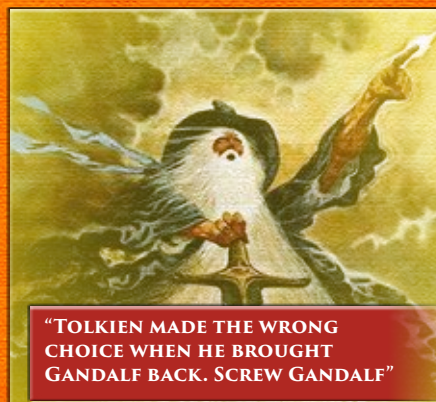
The ASOIAF series also owes credence to many other writers. In particular Robert Jordan (James Rigney), most well-known for his epic fantasy series *Wheel of Time*, who Martin was close friends with and even claimed- "*My own Ice & Fire series might never have found its audience without the cover quote that Jim was so kind as to provide, back when A Game of Thrones was first published*". Other influences GRRM has cited includes Jack Vance and Fritz Leiber, amongst others. Similarities with ASOIAF and the gritty historical fiction of authors like Bernard Cornwell (*The Warlord Chronicles*, *The Saxon Stories*) are also evident as Martin has sought to create mimetic fiction - fantasy that reflects reality; the strain of profound realism in Martin's writings is connected to medieval history rather than pure mythology. Which brings us on nicely to the next point...

HISTORICAL: Believe it or not, one of the reasons the series has such an affiliation with realism is its connection to history. The Middle Ages (476AD-1492 AD) have often functioned as a narrative lens through which to explore modern themes and fantastical stories, but with George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* it goes beyond that. Many of the events and characters are directly correlated to historical fact. Here's an example of a few to give you a 'method to the madness' for the inspiration behind much of the Westeros politics, wars, locations and betrayals.

For starters, one of the most engaging conflicts in the series- Lannister versus Stark, is directly influenced by 'The War of the Roses'. Lasting from 1455-1487, the series of dynastic wars for the throne of England fought by House Lancaster and House York left a country in disarray. Much like the events of Martin's series that lead to the 'War of the Five Kings', culminating in the third book *A Storm of Swords*. Evident comparisons can be seen with the rivalry between House Lannister and House Stark in the series. For example, the Lannisters and Lancasters, both whom are clad in red (a misconception fanned by Shakespeare) are wealthy families whose coats of arms bear a lion. House Stark, like the Yorks, are a proud and traditional Northern family (embodied in the TV series by everyone's favourite Yorkshireman, Sean Bean). Clever eh?

It is also interesting to note the similarities between Robb Stark's coming-of-age narrative trajectory, with that of Edward IV. Both men lost their father in humiliating circumstances. In the books, Ned is beheaded for crimes he didn't commit and later his head is set on a pike atop the city walls for all to behold. In a similar vein, Edward's father, Richard Duke of York was killed during the Battle of Wakefield and his head was mounted above the city of York's gates. To mock him further, the Lancastrians placed a paper crown on his head to dismiss his claim to the throne. (This mocking gesture is also reminiscent of the way in which the Frey's replaced Robb's head with that of his direwolf after the Red Wedding).

One last historical analogy concerns the 700ft wall that separates Westeros' Seven Kingdoms from the wilderness that lies beyond. This is obviously inspired by the Roman construct Hadrian's Wall. But I'm sure you all spotted that one right?



"TOLKIEN MADE THE WRONG CHOICE WHEN HE BROUGHT GANDALF BACK. SCREW GANDALF"



THE WAR OF THE ROSES [1455-1487]



RICHARD, DUKE OF YORK GETS THE NED STARK TREATMENT



A LITTLE WALL BUILT BY HADRIEN

THEORIES

One of the most interesting results of people's love for Martin's series is how much time fans invest into dissecting the multifaceted world he has created. GRRM has been berated for his 'slow' writing over the years, the six year gap between *A Feast For Crows* and *A Dance With Dragons* was painful for many. The gap between the releases though has allowed committed fans on the internet sufficient time to discuss and analyse the books in detail. The forums on Westeros.org and reddit.com/r/asoiaf have been outlets for readers to let their imaginations and creativity run wild. This has resulted in some audacious and some truly intriguing theories as to where the next plot twists are coming from. Here are a few to whet your appetite but be warned, they may actually prove to be true:



***R+L=J:** This is a heavily supported theory that has been referenced in the books. The theory Jon Snow is in fact not a bastard fathered by Ned Stark, but instead the child of Ned's sister Lyanna (whose death is mysterious and cryptic) and her supposed abductor Rhaegar Targaryen (Daenerys' older brother who was slain by Robert Baratheon). If this is true it would make Jon a Targaryen heir and could have some serious implications to the line of succession.



***BENJEN IS STILL ALIVE:** Remember Ned's brother who takes Jon to the Night's Watch but mysteriously disappears? Well, many have theorised he is still alive. Some even believe that he may be posing as somebody else, some have even gone as far as to suggest that he's across in the Narrow Sea in Essos posing as Daenerys' lover/henchman Daario Naharis. Unlikely and speculative, but that's the fun in theories.



***THE GREAT NORTHERN CONSPIRACY:** Fans of the Starks will enjoy this one. There is currently a theory that the minor houses in the North are planning to uprise and avenge the fallen Robb Stark. The details of how are too spoiler-filled but it involves the youngest Stark, little Rickon.

THE PRE-TELEVISION GAME OF THRONES

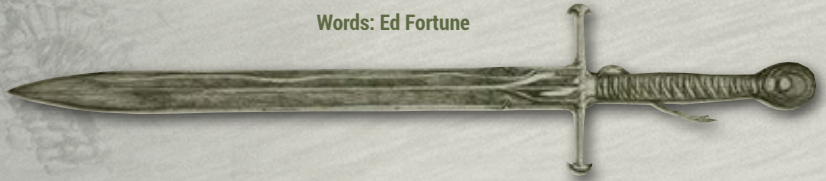


With season 5 throwing some curve balls in regards to major plot changes, now is as good of a time as any to delve into the books and discover the origins of one of the most popular TV series ever made. The books genuinely provide an experience that differs to the show but is ultimately more rewarding. The gritty, complex world that Martin has crafted is so immersive and the plots are so gripping that these books should be read by anyone who has enjoyed the series. Not only will they in turn fuel your love for the series and the characters whilst being an immersive experience, but you'll also be able to tease your friends with the knowledge of who dies and who lives...



DRAWING [WORDS]

Words: Ed Fortune



WILL SIMPSON is an internationally renowned artist whose work includes **BATMAN**, **JUDGE DREDD** and **ROGUE TROOPER**. He's storyboarded movies such as **YOUR HIGHNESS**, **CITY OF EMBER** and **REIGN OF FIRE**, and has been drawing for **GAME OF THRONES** since the beginning. We caught up with him to find out more...



STARBURST: What's your background?

Will Simpson: I'd done comic work for a long, long time, there's got to be about 25 years of comic work. Some of that overlapped with the film work. I started off with *Big Ben*, the man with no time for crime, in *Warrior Magazine*. I ended up going on to do *Transformers* for Marvel, then *Judge Dredd*, *Rogue Trooper*, *Universal Soldier* for 2000 AD, *Hellblazer*, *Vamps* for DC and even some *Aliens* for Dark Horse. During that time, I ended up doing some film work, and that eventually led to *Game of Thrones*.

How different is *Game of Thrones* from your first gig, *Big Ben*?

On *Big Ben*, I was learning. I was very lucky when I got the job to do. You find yourself keeping to deadline and maintaining consistency. There's a beautiful fantasy about how that works and I think it takes a certain kind of weird madness to stick with. From *Big Ben* to 2000 AD, the British style of doing comics was being ingrained. One of the things I loved about *Judge Dredd* was that you could come with your own ideas and create your own version. It's still one of the things that makes 2000 AD so incredibly special. You just have this range of very different artists. When I went across to America, it was 24 pages, and you were slotted into the American process of artist, inker and colourist, and I just didn't fare well with inkers! I'd rather be inking my own stuff.

My journey into storyboarding has been a very strange one because it was something I never intended to get into. It wasn't something that entered my head until I was asked to do a low budget feature film. I asked myself '*How hard can it be*'. They are quite different, but comic strip artists have a background in storytelling that transfers very well into the real world.





Because I can draw detail quickly, it really can help with storyboarding. It's a fluke that I went down the realistic style! When you think that Brendan McCarthy has been doing storyboards for years, and he has a hyper-realistic art style and he's perfectly attuned to storyboarding.

How did you end up working on *Game of Thrones*?

When I first stepped into *Game of Thrones*, I didn't even know what the book or story was. The fact that it was knights in armour, it was straight into what I loved in the past, which is Conan. I loved the Robert E. Howard stories; I'd love to draw that. The world that was conjured up on the page, with its ornateness and its grittiness just drew me. When I stepped into *Thrones*, it was like stepping into the greatest comic strip I could imagine doing. It was such good fun. At that stage, I was doing an awful lot of concept and design work. I was brought in to the production before we knew that we were going to get *Game of Thrones* in Belfast. I was working on *Your Highness* at the time, and I was asked to do some extra work on a potential TV series. They couldn't tell me what it was, but they gave me little descriptions of things to draw and I did. So I drew beheadings, knights, castles and great big wolves. They got the gig and I got the job.

When you're sitting in the art department room of a film studio and



suddenly this stuff is just belting out of you. I got to design the White Walkers, how cool is that? I got to do the original set of paintings on which everything else was based. I bought into the world instantly; it's the most amazing thing to be working on. Each season it gets more interesting.

With the White Walkers, I sat down with George's description from the book. A good film script is fairly succinct, so you have to take it straight from the book. I'm used to designing things really quickly because that's how it is with comics, and you find yourself going with the first image that's conjured in your head. There were things that George had put into play that really let me create something pretty damned spooky!

How has the look of the show evolved?

Well at the start, I didn't know who the actors were, so I didn't know what the characters looked like. The more I go on through the series, the more they look like the characters. It gives me a buzz to do that, it's much clearer that way. A picture paints a thousand words, I guess. I don't have perfect likenesses because you have to get the art turned out quickly. You're just trying to make sure it's clear enough for the director and the cameramen to understand. You also have to show how elaborate a scene will be so the producers can cost it.

With *Ice*, we knew we had to design a pretty big ceremonial sword. It was a Stark sword, and at the time all we knew was that they would be very severe, basic and from a cold climate. So we had little notions like wrapping the hilt in leather so it wouldn't freeze your hand. I talked to Tommy Dunn, who was our armourer at the time, and asked him what was the biggest sword he knew of. I'd been thinking of Scottish swords and Tommy started talking to me about Horse Killers. The sword was meant to be a big thing, so we widened it slightly. We had to have a solid thing that would balance out. I did a drawing of Ned with the sword to get the scale. Two weeks later, Tommy produced this massive, massive sword laid in a wolf's skin. It's a heavy, heavy thing, that's why you only ever see it on the side of Ned's horse or on special occasions.

Did your work on *Reign of Fire* affect the look of the dragons in *Game of Thrones*?

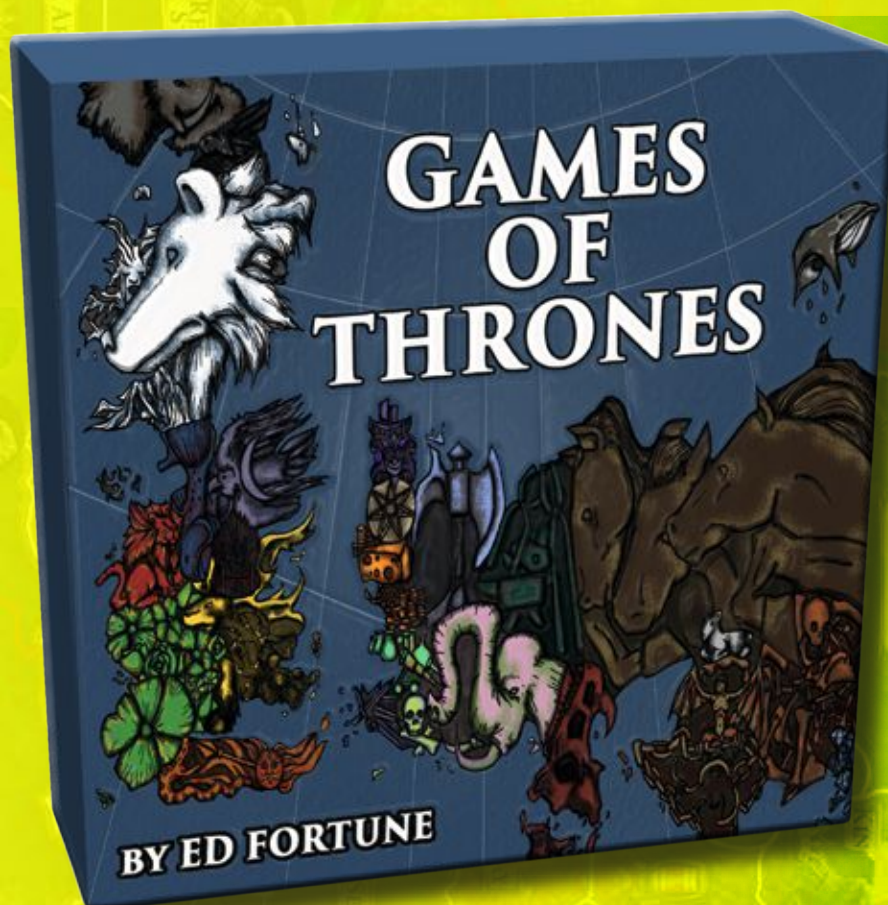
For *Reign of Fire* I mostly drew castle designs and the scenes with helicopters. I only got to draw shadows in clouds, though I got to draw the scene where the dragon awakes in the cave. The dragons had already been developed in the States. With *Game of Thrones*, I was asked to draw



a sampler of dragons. I did older dragons first, with flames belting out of them and riders on the back. I did the concept images of Dany [Daenerys Targaryen] with the baby dragons as well. The animatronics guys came up with something very beautiful in the end. They had the job of making something functional and you say to yourself 'that's what I should have drawn'.

You can see more of Will's *GAME OF THRONES* art in *THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO WESTEROS* on the Season One Blu-ray of *GAME OF THRONES*.





They say that when you play the Game of Thrones, you win or you die. Fortunately, the table top adaptations are nowhere near as harsh; the biggest penalty you'll get for losing is disappointment, though on the downside, if you win, you don't actually get to rule a vast fantasy kingdom.

The second edition of *A Game of Thrones Board Game* is one of the most accurate reflections of George R.R. Martin's famous work that you'll ever encounter, filled with complexity, action and clever politics. The actual game is rather beautiful. Not only is the board a huge map of Westeros, the box comes filled with rather solid playing pieces and each card, counter and booklet is filled with evocative illustrations. One of the pieces is even a Valyrian Steel Sword (though it's actually made of cardboard). You can easily tell that it's published by Fantasy Flight Games, mainly due to the huge number of counters and high level of intricacy. It's a gorgeous thing to look at, and it's just as lovely to play.

Three to six people take the role of the biggest houses in the series - Stark, Lannister, Baratheon, Greyjoy, Tyrell and Martell. The Houses are carefully balanced; some Houses are only playable when you have lots of players, mostly so you don't have to trawl through huge

tracts of land to get into a scrap. Each House has a thematically appropriate special ability so, for example, the Lannisters are stinking rich. Not only does this add to the atmosphere, it's also one of those twiddles that means that no singular strategy will win the day; you have to be lucky, tactical and treacherous to do well.

The basic mechanics are pretty simple. There are ten rounds, each with three phases. Draw event cards and follow the instructions, place order tokens on all of your territories, and then flip over the tokens and resolve them. Sounds simple? It is. But like all strongly designed and thematically clever games, there are layers within layers. The rules are simple and though there are lots of them, the basic principles are very straightforward so you can pick it up quickly. Also, there is fighting. Lots of fighting.

Nifty little counters, which come in a variety of flavours, each with their strengths and weaknesses, represent combat units. Footmen, Knights, Ships and Siege Engines all have their uses, though Ships are mostly useful for fending off rampaging Greyjoys (or doing a spot of rampaging, if you're playing the Greyjoys.) However, simply shuffling your warriors round the board is not the thrust of the game; this is not RISK. Oh goodness me, no!

Y'see, those order tokens we mentioned? They control things like raising armies, supporting other units, raid enemy lands and of course, full on invasion of another's territory. They're placed face down and all players reveal them at the same time. Before you do so, players are encouraged to barter, bicker and negotiate. Because of the way the map is designed and the careful balance of power between Houses, you have to do some negotiation to win. This makes fibbing for fun inevitable. You can promise House Lannister that you won't invade their territory, then assault them all out. Of course, the Lannisters may have figured out your treachery and already cut a deal with the Tyrells, and so on. Bicker too much however, and you'll be vulnerable to Wildlings, who can turn up late in the game to make things difficult for everyone.

Of course, even though you've been horribly betrayed, you may still be in with a chance; each player has a hand of character cards and they have remarkable abilities. Rob Stark, for example, gives the Starks a significant tactical advantage - one so juicy that a sensible player will do their best to nobble young Rob before he truly gets a chance to shine. Ties, by the way, are resolved by whoever is sitting on the Iron Throne at the time. This is a specific mechanic in the game, and makes being the King all the juicier. The ruler of Westeros has a huge advantage, but that



makes them prone to bribery, coercion and inevitable betrayal. The crown does see a lot of action and can be passed around frequently. However, in this case, it's a lovely little cardboard Iron Throne.

Control of the Throne is done through a blind bidding system, and again, you're encouraged to do deals with your fellow players. You can also bid to gain a military advantage or influence over the Maesters, and both of these have their own little counters to remind you of what you've won so far. Sometimes it's worth it to try to seize power early, sometimes it's foolish. Overall, it evokes the books and TV show rather wonderfully.

A Game of Thrones Board Game: Second Edition takes about 3 to 4 hours to play, depending on how many people are playing, and who. It works best in a strongly social environment; invite some friends round, make plenty of party food available and have a rather pleasant evening backstabbing your friends. It does take a little while to get the hang of, but after you've played it once you find yourself wanting to play it again. Much like the novels and the TV show, the *Game of Thrones Board Game* takes old ideas and reforges them into something new and exciting. Despite the game's relative youth, it's already being seen as a classic example of how to create

a diplomacy-based strategy game and make it fun.

It also has two handy expansions. *A Feast for Crows* introduces House Arryn, which allows you to get that cunning sneak Littlefinger into the action. It also introduces objective cards, which change the win conditions of the game and make the whole thing more strategic. The other expansion is *A Dance with Dragons* and introduces new cards that allow you to adjust the game so it more closely reflects the events from the novel of the same name. Both expansions feature scenarios that adjust the balance of power without making the game too unfair to any one type of player.

Game of Thrones: Westeros Intrigue is another game inspired by Martin's singular work. Unlike the *A Game of Thrones Board Game: Second Edition* it's not a big, bold and complex game, nor does it feature a vast amount of artwork; mostly it has pictures from the TV series. What it does have going for it is that it's been designed by industry legend Reiner Knizia, who is responsible for popular games such as *Blue Moon*, *Tigris & Euphrates* and *Taj Mahal*. He has a string of awards and a wide and varied portfolio.

Knizia has returned to one of his simpler design themes in this case; this a fun little

card game where you have to match and place cards, outfoxing your opponent with simple strategy and stacking the cards in your favour. The franchise tie-in is mostly decorative but this does not detract from the fun; anyone can pick up this game in seconds and it's the sort of thing that's handy to have around if you need to while away some time with friends. It also works well as an icebreaker.

Game of Thrones: Westeros Intrigue is an entry-level card game and it's important not to compare it directly to *A Game of Thrones Board Game: Second Edition*, because they're designed with different goals and audiences in mind. This jolly little card game is designed as a cheap and cheerful distraction. It's quick to set-up, quick to play and very pleasant indeed. It goes well with an evening of quick fire card gaming and fans of the likes of *Dobble* or *Skull and Roses: Skull* will find this a welcome addition to their range of starting games.

Whether you want a light and frothy snack or a vast banquet, both are available to the clever games player. Both are a feast, the crows are optional.

A GAME OF THRONES BOARD GAME: SECOND EDITION and GAME OF THRONES: WESTEROS INTRIGUE are both available now.

BALLS to the WALL

Words: Ed Fortune

JAMES COSMO is a familiar face; a Scottish actor, known for his work in movies such as **HIGHLANDER**, **BRAVEHEART**, and **TRAINSPOTTING**. He recently played Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, Jeor Mormont in **GAME OF THRONES**. We caught up with him to find out more about his time on *The Wall*...

STARBURST: How did you end up in *Game of Thrones*?

James Cosmo: The usual process with a big series is that you go and read and however many people have read for the part, ten or twenty people, they get them in and they narrow it down to usually about three. You've done it a few times by then. It's a horrible process because you have to go one after the other and do the same part. It comes down to the network to decide who is going to do it.

With *Game of Thrones*, I got a call to go and read for this new series that was coming up and they emailed the sides through to me. I hadn't read any of George Martin's stuff at all. I read this long, explanatory piece where Mormont tells the new recruits what the Night's Watch is. It was very interesting, talking about the morality, aim and dedication of the Night's Watch, which is so different to anything else in *Game of Thrones*. It's a secular group of men who've dedicated their lives so I found the speech really interesting. Usually you can go in with the sides in your hand and you can refer to

them. But I thought I really want to do this, so I worked really hard at it overnight and got it all off. I went in and read for them, just with the casting director, an assistant and little camera. Then that was it, and the next thing I got was an email from George Martin saying, "*I really want you to be Lord Mormont, welcome aboard*", so I didn't have to go through the whole process! The next thing I knew, I was travelling to Belfast and coming on to the set of Castle Black. It's pretty impressive; they've taken over that whole quarry and painted it white and built the castle. With the CGI on top of that it's very impressive.

How different is the work for the likes of *Game of Thrones* and *Braveheart* from modern day drama?

I think with modern roles one looks toward a greater sense of reality to try and capture truth in your performance. With the big historical roles, it's the world but 20% bigger. They're big stories. They're stories of incredible heroism. It's a bit hotter in the kitchen than normal. It's interesting to play either side of that

fence. In a modern day drama, you're trying to achieve absolute reality and the truth of that character. In the big historical things, it's creating a character like that, but who could also ride into battle. Something that we in the 21st century can't really comprehend. It just has to be ramped up that little bit.

A lot of characters die during the show, including yours. How does that change the dynamic?

Well I sort of knew from the start. I hadn't read the books but a friend of mine who I go fly-fishing with had started to read them and he'd tell me. "*You're still alive in book one James*" and I'd be, "*Oh good.*" Then it was, "*You're still alive in book two*" and I was, "*Oh that's excellent*" and then he said, "*You're in book three, but not for very long.*" [laughs] I hear that the actors have begun to read the scripts from the back towards the front to see if they're still there. It's a wonderful device that George uses. Sean Bean in the first part; he's the hero. You follow the hero and then whoops, he's dead! It

makes the audience re-engage and think, "Who do I follow now?" I think that's why the show has such longevity; they keep diverting the audience. Whereas in another series, if it keeps plodding on, the audience begins to flag. With *Game of Thrones*, they introduce characters, they kill off characters, it keeps the audience's interest very fresh.

Are there any classical works you'd love to be involved in?

Classical, no. I was never trained as a classical actor. I've done stage work and hopefully have been successful, and I've enjoyed it. But as far as classical theatre goes it's a very different genre. It's almost a different profession, doing Shakespeare and all that sort of stuff. To transition from that to what I do is quite a journey and to be honest, it's something that's never really interested me particularly. I started in film and that's where I've always felt the most comfortable. You know your way around the space, you know what's happening, you know what they're talking about and so that's my comfort area.

What adaptation or special project would you love to be involved with?

There's one book that I know Tommy Lee Jones has owned the rights to for years. It will never be made into a film, or at least not one worthy of the book, which is called *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, who wrote *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. I think he's one of the foremost novelists of the twentieth century, he's wonderful. *Blood Meridian* is his masterwork, which he wrote quite a few years ago but it is the most extraordinary work. It's the only book I've read from page one to the end and then started at page one immediately again and got more from it on the second

reading. There's so much there, the richness of the language and the writing, it's so extraordinary. The images that he builds up in your mind! It's about a group of men in 1860 going down into Mexico hunting Indians for scalps. It's about a descent into hell. In a way, I'd love to see that film made but it will never be as good as the book. There is a saying that you should make films out of ordinary books. Don't try and make films out of great books because you're never going to get there. Books can create whole worlds in people's imaginations. That's one of the things about *Game of Thrones*. It's really interesting that a lot of the fans of books have been very complimentary about the series and that doesn't happen very often.

Do you think that's one of the advantages of turning a work like *A Song of Ice and Fire* into a TV series, rather than a movie?

Yes I think so. They have the time and the space to really invest in the characters. I know they're talking about a one-off movie, and you never can tell; David Benioff and Dan Weiss are extraordinary in their writing and in their production ability. Maybe a one-off film or a series will do very well. Certainly, the TV series has been extraordinary.

Why is fantasy so popular again?

It could be a lot of things. I think the world has become a very scary place and a very cold place. I think giving people a couple of hours of escapism is no bad thing. It's a relief from the horrors abroad and what seems to be an uncaring society at home.

What advice would you give to a young actor?

Apart from an ability to act - shall we say that's a given - if you *know* you can act and you *believe* you can act, I think the most important element is stickability! It's



being able to say after a year out of work, I am still an actor. I might be working in a pub or on the roads, but I'm still an actor. I'm still observing and I'm still learning about people because I'm going to use that as an actor.

It's keeping on going. The amount of people who come out of drama school who have a couple of years out of work and think I can't do this anymore is huge. There are not many actors who have been in the business as long as I have that have just kept on going! It's tough, and rejection is part of the business. You've got to cope with that, it's really hard for people. Imagine you came up for eighty job interviews and nobody was interested - that happens all the time to actors. You've got to be able to cope with that and still have belief in yourself. ✦

JAMES COSMO has several films in post-production including the horror film *DARK SIGNAL*, produced by Neil Marshall.



LIVE by the SWORD...

by Dominic Cuthbert

IT'S TIME TO DON YOUR BEST TOGA, AND DUST OFF YOUR SANDALS AND SCABBARD, AS STARBURST TAKES A LOOK AT THE MAGICAL WORLD OF HEROIC FANTASIES...

To anyone who grew up with a hunger for all things dragons and daggers, scouting out suitable film and TV could be a lonely pastime. But with the masses flocking to *Game of Thrones*, and given MTV's upcoming *Shannara* series, it's fairly safe to say that fantasy is big, beautiful and very much here to stay. But there's a world beyond Westeros, and we take a look back at the best of sword and sorcery. While the term is often used as a backhanded compliment, we're here to reclaim it in a celebration of the screen's greatest sandal wearing heroes.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer or *Voyager*'s own Captain Janeway might be first to spring to mind when contemplating the nineties and its archetypal female badass, but for any self-respecting fantasy fan, Xena was (and remains) the ultimate in badassery. Spun out of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, brought to life by the ineffable New Zealander Lucy Lawless, and with tongue always firmly in cheek, Xena captured the sea change at the turn of the century, proving that genre film and TV wasn't just a boys' club. The character was spawned by writer, director and producer Robert Tapert with a little help from his friends, including *Evil Dead* mastermind Sam Raimi. Xena herself was somewhere between Red Sonja and Conan the Barbarian and tougher than both, questing for redemption for her past indiscretions by using her skills to defend the defenceless. Like Spike in Joss Whedon's vampire caper, Xena proved too popular among fans to up and leave. She was famously planned for a three-episode arc (which ended in her death) in *Hercules*, but the producers capitalised on her popularity and the rest is history... well... fantasy. Yes, the show is cheesier than a particularly cheesy piece of cheddar, with much of the acting equally as hammy, but it taught a generation of young girls that they could grow up to be tough, fierce and self-sufficient and that's a wonderful thing.

Given the glut of sword and sorcery titles that came out in the nineties, it's not wholly unreasonable to start flinging the term 'Golden Age' about. Whatever your own leaning on the subject, you can't deny there's a wealth of quality TV and film for the genre fan. Loosely



xena:warrior princess



the beastmaster, 1999



dungeons and dragons

based on the admittedly iffy 1982 film *The Beastmaster*, its TV companion was let loose in 1999, running for three seasons before coming to an end in 2002. Following the adventures of Dar (Daniel Goddard), the last survivor of his tribe, who has the ability to communicate with and control animals, *Beastmaster* sees Dar wandering a changing world, defending animals and fighting sorcerers and tyrants. While a perfectly functioning fantasy show, and a great double bill with *Xena*, its campiness is at odds with fantasy TV post-*Game of Thrones*.

Caught somewhere in the middle is BBC's *Merlin*. Running for an impressive five series, *Merlin* was reportedly inspired by *Smallville*, and focussed on the awkward years of pop culture's most prevalent sorcerer. Played with gusto by Colin Morgan, the show gave the dusty Arthurian legends a modern twist, with zesty characters and engaging story arcs, but the less said about the wobbly CG the better. Superhero origin stories might be all the rage, but *Merlin* gave viewers a show they didn't know they wanted. Since ending in 2012, no other has quite filled the gap.

It was inevitable, talking about sword and sorcery, that there'd be at least one mention of *Dungeons and Dragons*. In this case, it's the animated series from 1983. Forget you ever saw the dreadful 2000 live-action adaptation; the animated series is still the definitive TV/film version of the beloved tabletop role-playing game. The game itself might very well be the epitome of high fantasy, but the animated series was sword and sorcery to the core. Marking a co-production between TSR and Marvel Productions, with visuals from prolific Japanese company Toei Animation, it managed to capture the magic and vastness of its namesake. It focussed on a band of six merry friends who are transported to the D&D realm after a fairground ride goes disastrously wrong; the series follows their adventures as they attempt to find a way home, with the help of the impish dungeon master. Its animation is admittedly primitive by today's standards, but perhaps more than any other title mentioned above or below, it relishes in genre tropes and shows off the franchise's rich storytelling.

If *Game of Thrones* has taught genre newcomers anything about fantasy, then

it's the lineage with history. Drawing heavily from the War of the Roses and owing more than a passing nod to French historical fiction, George R. R. Martin's epics have all the conviction of real-world history, in spite of the magic, dragons and zombies. Period dramas are a continual TV favourite, and one show takes its historic setting and throws in plenty of Gothic imagery, magic and mystery - which could only be the History Channel's *Vikings*. Conjured up by Michael Hirst (*The Tudors*) and based on the classic Viking Saga, the show follows Ragnar Lothbrok (Travis Fimmel), one of the most endearing figures of Norse history and mythology. The show also gave viewers the shieldmaiden Lagertha, one of the best characters of any genre for the last five years. All events depicted are best taken with a keg of salt, but it's all the better for it. What sets *Vikings* apart from *The Tudors*, say, is the misty atmospheres, the exaggerated exploits and The Seer, a parody of a man with blackened lips and flesh-sealed eyes, gifted with supernatural abilities to communicate with the gods. Steeped in history, yes, but owing as much to the



the vikings



the lord of the rings. 1978

fantastical as the rest of them.

To dub *The Lord of the Rings* sword and sorcery is a simplification of Tolkien's encyclopaedic novel, but part of its enduring charm and appeal is the merging of warfare, the fantastical and a long emotional journey. Forget *The Hobbit*, Gandalf should have had his own spin-off movie, but that's a conversation for another time. As impressive a trilogy as Peter Jackson's adaptation remains, he was beaten to the punch by Ralph Bakshi's splendid animated outing from 1978. Combining traditional animation alongside rotoscoping, it's a distinctive and immersive watch (though making for a near-hallucinatory experience today). As it's only one-half of Tolkien's novels, it does feel incomplete, though a treasured relic for any fan of Middle Earth. Leonard

Rosenman's score is worlds apart from the nuances of Howard Shore's, but there's a great cast sporting John Hurt and *Star Wars*' own Anthony Daniels. It's no wonder Jackson himself readily admits the influence of the film on his own trilogy.

The Lord of the Rings may be the quintessential fantasy story, but nothing quite sums up sword and sorcery like *Conan the Barbarian*. Despite (or maybe because of) the swanky 2011 remake with Jason Momoa in the titular role, we still have a soft spot for Arnie. Gritty doesn't always mean better, and the genre is often at its best with a dose of camp and added humour. Now, the 1982 adaption directed by screenwriter John Milius is more like it. Admit it; punching a camel is pretty darn hilarious. Based on the beloved stories of Robert E. Howard, the film follows

the eponymous barbarian on a quest to avenge his tribe, who were slain by a sorcerer and his band of warriors when Conan was but a boy. With its cookie-cutter sequel and a third announced (starring Arnie, no less), the character is very much alive in the sword strokes of genre fans, and remains a muscle-bound piece of pop culture.

Ralph Bakshi's 1983 animated adventure *Fire and Ice* bears more than a passing resemblance to *Conan the Barbarian*, but is very much its own beast. Like his take on *The Lord of the Rings*, Bakshi used rotoscoping, though to greater effect than its predecessor did. Collaborating with the fantasy/sci-fi artist Frank Frazetta and based on characters created by both, *Fire and Ice* tells the story of Larn, the sole survivor of a village destroyed by the frosty domain of the evil ice lord Nekron. The ice lord continues his treachery, heading for Fire Keep, ruled over by the honourable Jarol. When his daughter Teegra is abducted by Nekron's forces, Larn sets out to search for her, culminating in a climactic battle between good and evil. Despite the film grossing less than \$1 million, it's a splendid watch, in spite of being old fashioned in its portrayal of Teegra. Set for the live-action reboot treatment, helmed by Robert Rodriguez, this old thing might have a few new fans in transit.

Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf* may not be a film you often find yourself thinking about, or one you'd ever care to revisit since its 2007 release, but its problems stretch beyond the Neil Gaiman-penned script, which brilliantly condenses the epic poem into a two-hour film. It's more Ray Winstone's uncharismatic performance, and the visual style which time hasn't been kind to. Despite the film's shortcomings,



conan the barbarian. 1982



conan the barbarian. 2011



fire and ice



beowulf



Dragonheart

it did prove that the 'un-filmable' is often filmable. It may not quite have worked, but putting an important piece of literature onscreen is to be applauded, and may have opened the floodgates for the adaptation the poem rightly deserves.

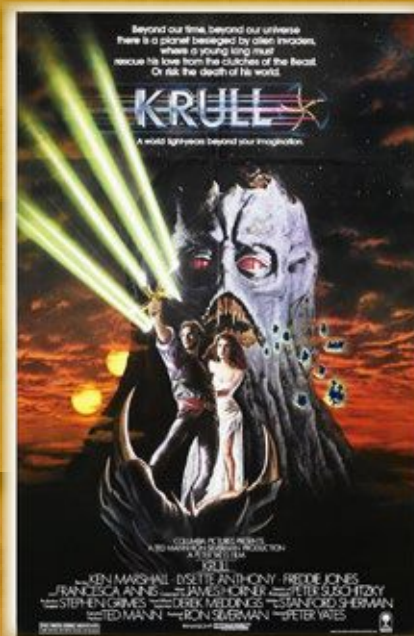
Hawk the Slayer may edge towards the so bad-it's-good camp, but nevertheless, it's a rollicking ride around fantasy not afraid to show off its tropes. Having seen both his father and fiancée murdered by his brother, Voltan, Hawk (Jack Palance) with a newly minted magical sword, sets out to put together a band of companions to bring an end to his brother's evil rule. While there was plenty of room for a sequel, with director Terry Marcel all but guaranteeing as much, a follow-up never happened. While a reboot might lose the film's corny

magic, in the hands of the right director (we'd put our money on Edgar Wright) *Hawk the Slayer* might be a film you can be proud of liking. IMDB might list '*Hawk the Hunter*' as in development, but details are as scant as Red Sonja's armour.

Rob Cohen's *DragonHeart* is a film that needs little introduction; you'll either have grown up watching it and retain a soft spot, or you'll find it too cheesy to bear. For all its sword and sorcery tropes, *DragonHeart* is little more than an odd couple buddy movie. Take one dragon-slayer and force him to team up with a dragon, and let hilarity ensue. But it went deeper than that, spinning a tale of redemption, discovery and, ultimately, friendship. Dennis Quaid isn't the best pick for a leading man, and we're still wondering who on Earth thought Sean Connery was an appropriate voice for a dragon, but next time

it's on TV, treat yourself.

If *DragonHeart* got the tawdry side of the genre down, then *Ladyhawke* certainly has the magical side. After escaping prison, a young thief named Philippe Gaston (Matthew Broderick) meets Captain Navarre (Rutger Hauer) who, like his lover Isabeau (Michelle Pfeiffer), was cursed: he to live as wolf at night, and she to be a hawk during the day. Navarre convinces Gaston to help him into the city so he can kill the bishop who cursed them. It's hard to hate on any film starring the indomitable Rutger Hauer, and he makes up one half of cinema's most spellbinding couples opposite Pfeiffer. Both leads bring what could have been just a mediocre fantasy flick to life. Andrew Powell's divisive synth-heavy score, which does anchor the film firmly in the mid-eighties, was a





faithfulness to the source material, the Germanic classical music and the impressive cast (featuring Helen Mirren, Patrick Stewart, Liam Neeson, Gabriel Byrne and Nigel Terry as Arthur) makes for one of the best-loved adaptations, and it very nearly is the finest.

Given that fantasy is at its very best with humour thrown into the mix, it's little wonder that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is perhaps the most enduring sword and sorcery film. Putting their own unique spin on the Arthurian legends, the Pythons made the most of their £230,000 budget, most of which was blown on the giant wooden rabbit. Making great use of costumes and the English countryside really brought the wacky caper together. Putting together the most memorable ensemble of any Arthurian adaptation (and yes, Graham Chapman is the definitive King Arthur), the knights are pitted against progressively sillier adversaries, many of which have become as much a part of pop culture as *Star Wars* or Spider-Man. It's the Knights Who Say Ni and the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog that gives the film so much of its lasting legacy. But for this writer's money it's Tim the Enchanter, played by the infectiously funny John Cleese, that really marks the film out as a contender to any of the above. In fact, add Tim to that Gandalf spin-off movie.

Sword and sorcery is often typified by its high camp, reliance on genre tropes and some awkward dialogue, and it's exactly for those reasons and more why we adore it. The subgenre puts emphasis on the personal, the major conflict being against one's own demons. So whether you're gunning for Xena, Conan or Hawk, raise a goblet, sharpen your sword and consult your spell book, the best is yet to come.

wonderful break from tradition and only continued to set the film apart from others.

Peter Yates' 1983 *Krull*, however, is one film that starts worlds apart from any other in the genre. Straddling the line between sci-fi and fantasy, the story is simple enough: prince saves princess. *Batman* (1966) screenwriter Stanford Sherman took a tired concept and put an intriguing spin on it. Aliens travel through the galaxy in mountain-like space ships and invade the primitive people of Krull. Despite being a financial flop, its cult status is legendary. Marking early screen roles for British legends Liam Neeson and Robbie Coltrane, *Krull* is sadly a concept we haven't seen nearly enough of since its 1983 release.

There's been many takes on the Arthurian story over the decades, with varying levels of success, but one more than any other maintains a sense of

history and appreciation of its chosen source material: *Excalibur*. Director, producer and co-writer John Boorman based his film on the 15th century French text *The Death of Arthur* by writer Thomas Malory. It tells the story of Uther Pendragon, gifted the magical sword Excalibur by the wizard Merlin from the lady in the lake. Mortally wounded, Uther thrusts the sword into a stone, so that anyone who might pull it out would be king. So far, so familiar. Of course, Arthur grows up to pull out the sword, become king, marry Guinevere and convene the round table. But his half-sister Morgana, in the form of Guinevere, seduces Arthur and falls pregnant with a son, Mordred. The two eventually meet in battle, both killing the other and the fabled sword is returned to the lake, ready for a future king. The



monty python and the holy grail

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CONAN the CONQUEROR

by Ed Fortune

GAME OF THRONES may owe a large debt to one of the most enduring and influential fantasy figures, Robert E. Howard's **CONAN**. **STARBURST** looks at the muscle-bound **CIMMERIAN** in all his guises...

CONAN THE LIBRARIAN

Conan The Barbarian: the name is almost as recognisable as James Bond, Sherlock Holmes or Batman, but then a near-naked, heavily muscled, and somehow permanently oiled warrior carrying an enormous sword tends to stick in your mind somewhat.

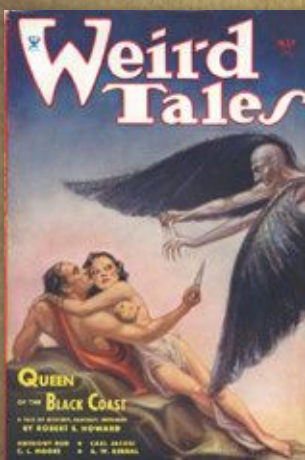
Conan was Robert E. Howard's best-known character, and first appeared in American magazine *Weird Tales*. The debut story, called *The Phoenix on the Sword*, starts roughly in the middle of Conan's chronology. The Cimmerian (a fictional, Celt-like race) is middle-aged and has become the king of Aquilonia. Conan is better suited to violence than bureaucracy, and leaps at the chance to eschew the humdrum to bash heads. He quickly gets embroiled in the affairs of sorcerers, assassins and finally gets to beat up a demonic ape. The story does establish the basic rules of Conan's

world (known as The Hyborian Age) quite well; magic is never to be trusted, most gods aren't worth worshipping and some things have to be solved with the pointy end of a sword. It's also notable in that it's a rewrite of one of Howard's earlier stories, and originally featured Kull, a sort of prototype version of Conan.

Howard only wrote 28 stories featuring Conan, though the length varies all the way from short story to novel. The bulk of them are roughly between 7,500 and 17,500 words long. Others exist in fragmented forms, or as poetry, and one, *The Hyborian Age*, is more of a 'story bible', detailing the facts of Conan's world. The tales vary in quality and style throughout; *Queen of the Black Coast* is a love story that relies heavily on poetry to convey its weight, the similarly lyrical *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* is a reimagining of Norse myth and *The God in the Bowl* is a murder-mystery. Conan's career changes

as he grows up: from Blacksmith's son, to thief, to mercenary, to King, but throughout his life, his personality stays consistently surly. The common thread of the stories is Conan himself and the author's seemingly effortless world building.

Robert E. Howard is broadly regarded as one of the most prolific and influential fantasy writers of the twentieth century. Despite his short life (which Howard tragically ended himself when he was only 30 years old), he produced well over 200 works of fiction, in such diverse genres as sports, westerns and of course, sword and sorcery. Howard is broadly thought of as one of the fathers of the modern fantasy genre alongside the likes of Fritz Leiber, Clark Ashton Smith, T. H. White, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Reprints of Conan stories formed the backbone of both UK and US fantasy publishers' back catalogues as far back as the Fifties, with



collections of Howard's work that had not seen print added in for good measure. They've been assembled in all sorts of ways, including by theme, chronology and order of original publication.

Conan also allowed a host of US authors to cut their teeth on fantasy writing, either by completing unfinished Conan stories or by creating their own. Arguably an early example of professional fan fiction, authors include Poul Anderson, L. Sprague de Camp, Roland J. Green, Sean A. Moore, Steve Perry, John Maddox Roberts and Harry Turtledove. *Wheel of Time* creator Robert Jordan was also a Conan writer, going on to write the movie adaptations. Overall, others have created over 50 novels and several anthologies worth of short stories about Conan, and such is the hero's timeless appeal that it looks unlikely to stop any time soon.

CONAN THE COMIC BOOK HERO

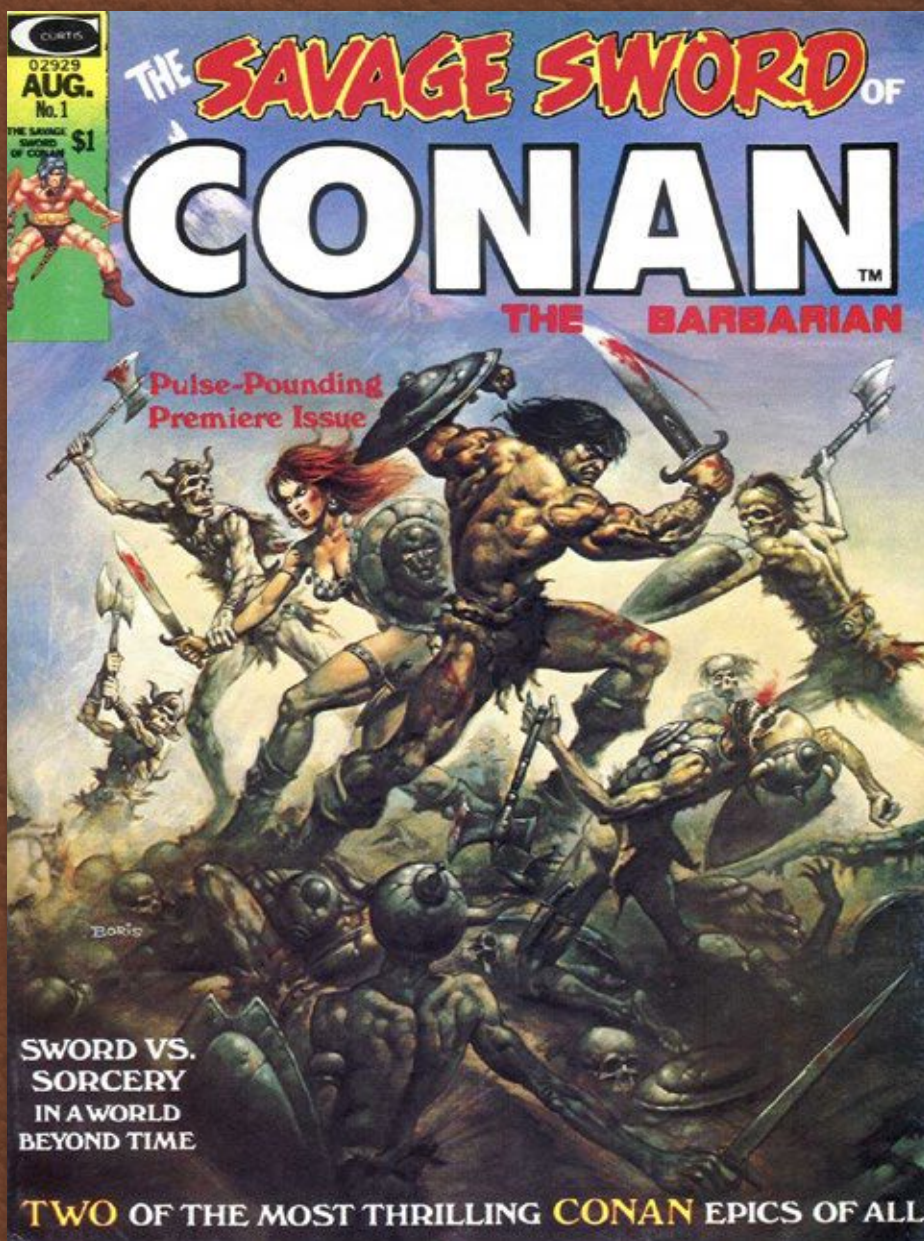
Compared to his adventures on the silver screen, Conan has been treated quite well by the comic books industry. Usually fantasy franchises tend to go through multiple publishers before truly finding their feet, but Conan - at least in the world of comics - has trodden a well-worn path, sticking to the mainstream as his appeal has waxed and waned over the years.

Conan's first journey into the funny books was in 1952, in Mexican comic anthology *Cuentos de Abuelito* (*Grandpa Tales*). This adaptation of *Queen of the Black Coast* featured a blonde Conan (mostly for production reasons) and a very sultry looking version of Belit, who looks more like Bettie Page than a she-devil. She's also the lead, rather than Conan, which is rather nice. This version would be reprinted several times and well into the '60s by firms such as Ediciones Joma and EMA. American fans also produced bootleg translations and a complete and pristine set of the various iterations of this one Conan story is still sought after by collectors.

This underground popularity eventually caught the attention of the mainstream publishers. Marvel Comics, looking to diversify its brand, picked up the license for Conan. Instantly popular, the character became a mainstay of Marvel's line and caused a rush of swords and sorcery comic books. Marvel produced two lines: the Conan comic books (which had various names) and the Conan magazine, *The Savage Sword of Conan*. Both contained comic strips, though *Savage Sword* simply skirted past the Comics Code Authority rules by calling itself a magazine, and was firmly aimed at an older readership. The comic book was rebooted several times, each time with a different name: *Conan the Barbarian*, *Conan the King*, *Conan the Savage*, etc. This is the version of Conan who met the Marvel Super Heroes (and beat up Wolverine) and appeared front and centre as part of the Marvel brand, and was primarily written by Roy Thomas. Thomas also invented numerous new characters, including Red Sonja, who is a mishmash of original Howard characters and Thomas's own genius.

CONAN AND CTHULHU

These days, The Cthulhu Mythos can be found everywhere, from spooky detective shows to kids telly. The tentacles of the mythos were wide spread from the very beginning, however. Cthulhu creator H. P. Lovecraft was a friend of Conan inventor Robert E. Howard and they both wrote for the same magazine, *Weird Tales*. They wrote to each other extensively, and the first draft of *The Tower of the Elephant* actually mentioned Cthulhu itself. (Howard changed it to The Old Ones by the final version.) More significantly, the Snake Men of Yig appear in both authors' works, though in Conan, Yig is more commonly referred to as Set. Another beastie to cross over is Dagon, though he gets much more action in the Cthulhu Mythos than he does in Conan.





Thomas also wrote the bulk of *The Savage Sword of Conan*, which was wildly popular in the seventies and eighties, but was eventually wrapped up in 1995. During its 21-year run, the book adapted the bulk of Robert E. Howard's work into graphic form, producing some utterly lovely artwork, easily finding a market in both the US and UK. Thomas himself wrote a great many Conan stories for the magazine and is one of the most significant contributors to the Hyborian Age.

In 2003, Dark Horse Comics hired the award-winning Kurt Busiek to write Conan stories for them. Dark Horse had been picking up discarded Marvel licenses at the time, and it seemed a logical step to hire one of the most highly regarded creators in the industry to put a new spin on an old character. Busiek blended modern storytelling with the old Hyborian charm to create something rather special. Though there are plenty of adaptations of Howard classics, the bulk of Dark Horse's Conan

output consists of new stories from established authors; writers include P. Craig Russell, Timothy Truman, Joe R. Lansdale, and of course, Roy Thomas. The art style continued in the same vein as Marvel's *Savage Sword*, dusky and oil painting-like, filled with gore with sweeping vistas to provoke an epic feel.

CONAN THE MOVIE STAR

With the vast wealth of stories produced by Robert E. Howard, it's a bit of a surprise that there aren't more movies about Conan the Barbarian. The few that there are however, all seem to have their own notable appeal, somehow capturing the pulp charm of the Cimmerian in their own unique ways.

1982's *Conan the Barbarian* was meant to be the start of a glorious series of Conan movies. Alas, we only got a handful, partially due to the success of its main actor, an Austrian body builder called

Arnold Schwarzenegger, who went on to become an action movie superstar, with his shadow dominating later attempts to make movies that don't feature him. *Conan the Barbarian* is also memorable for its lead villain Thulsa Doom, played by the voice of Darth Vader himself, James Earl Jones. The script is an interesting hodgepodge of ideas, a veritable playlist of greatest hits from The Hyborian Age. Character names and types are chopped and changed; the role of Valeria is a mix of female companions to the Barbarian rather than a faithful version of Valeria herself. Thulsa Doom is also a blend of villains, though his characterisation owes more to the snake-like villain Thoth Amon than anyone else. The movie had been in production since the early seventies, and the likes of Oliver Stone and Ridley Scott were involved at one stage. The screenplay eventually made it through development hell





and became a classic. *Conan the Barbarian* is also responsible for many a movie geek misattributing a Genghis Khan quote to Conan, so there's that.

The massive commercial success led to a sequel being commissioned, and a planned series of features. With Schwarzenegger tied into a contract with Italian movie producer Dino De Laurentiis, more movies seemed inevitable. The only thing that would stop Conan from becoming a franchise the size of Bond or Star Wars was a badly judged sequel.

Conan the Destroyer was a generic fantasy movie starring Arnie. The violence was toned down, as it was thought this would broaden the appeal of the movie, despite the fact that the original movie did very well *because* of its higher rating. Whereas the first movie was a careful splicing of 1930's pulp and Hollywood

necessity, the sequel was a bland attempt at capturing the magic of the first movie without really understanding its appeal. In addition to poor production and direction choices, the casting was also profoundly lacking. Most notable was the presence of Jamaican super-model Grace Jones, who was cast as Zula the Warrior. Her lack of acting talent made Arnie's own paltry skills appear masterful. It's worth noting that Zula isn't a character from the original books, though a male sorcerer called Zula did briefly appear in the Marvel comics. *Conan the Destroyer* didn't lose the studio money, but was critically panned. A change in direction was needed, and quickly, hence the production of a third Hyborean tale, *Red Sonja*.

Featuring the rather striking Brigitte Nielsen as the titular Red Sonja, her acting skill was at least on par with her co-star



CONAN THE CARTOON

If you grew up in the '80s and '90s, there's a fair chance that Sunbow produced a good number of the cartoons from your childhood. If it was tied to some sort of plastic toy or other, it was almost certainly Sunbow's fault, as they specialised in 30-minute toy adverts disguised as kid's telly. Two of their products had a very loose connection to the world of Conan. 1992's *Conan the Adventurer* starred a teenage Conan fighting the awful Wrath Amon and his serpent army. Conan had a squeaky-voiced sidekick called Needle - a baby phoenix who spoke in the third person. He was also assisted by (thankfully non-speaking) horse called Thunder and a small band of friends who filled out the sort of demographics you had in American kid's cartoons back then. The show wasn't utterly awful, and survived for 60-odd episodes, mostly thanks to the sort of savagery rarely seen in this sort of thing. It was superseded by the utterly bland *Conan and the Young Warrior*, which was pretty much Conan in name only, and proved to *Conan the Adventurer* critics that things could have been worse. Fortunately, it only lasted 13 episodes before falling into the bottomless pit of obscurity. In case you're wondering, the spin-off toys the cartoon was meant to promote quickly became bargain bin items.

Another animated feature of note is *Conan: Red Nails*. Announced way back in 2005, this straight-to-DVD project promised to be an adaptation of the last Conan story. As source material goes, it's a very strong story and the likes of Mark Hamill, Ron Perlman and James Marsden were attached the project. Ten years on and there's still been no sign of the feature, apart from a few test pieces on YouTube. We can call this one officially dead on arrival.

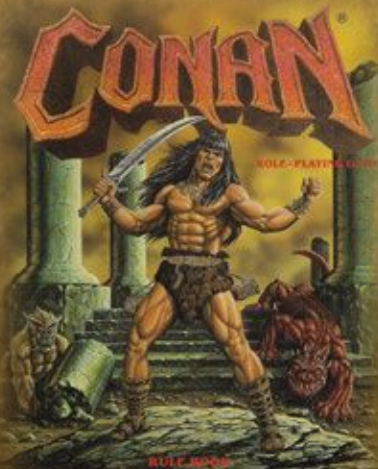


CONAN THE ADVENTURE GAME

It might come as no surprise that the iconic semi-naked adventurer has been the subject of more than a few tabletop games. Dungeons and Dragons inventors TSR tried to cash in on the 1984 movie *Conan the Destroyer* by producing two adventures, both featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger on the cover. They were both pretty terrible, but sold well enough that a year later TSR launched the *Conan Role-Playing Game*. Sadly, the adventures produced for it were quite naff, though it did have some fantastic artwork. Interestingly, the system was sort-of compatible with the *Marvel Super Heroes RP*, which may have led to some interesting crossovers.

Steve Jackson Games carried on Conan's crossover appeal by producing *GURPS: Conan*. GURPs is a system designed with mix and matching in mind, and this 1989 book spawned a handful of supplements before also becoming extinct. It would be another fifteen years before Mongoose Games tried to capture a bit of Hyborian Magic. Despite a formidable collection of supplements and a horde of writers, Mongoose haven't printed anything for the game since 2007.

Video games have had similarly poor luck. The first few attempts were Arnie-inspired side scrolling platformers that looked more like *Ghosts 'n Goblins* than anything else. *Conan: The Mysteries of Time* even started development as an entirely different, modern-day inspired platformer that was reskinned, and that didn't stop it from being crap. 2004's *Conan: The Dark Axe* was a little better, thanks to its third-person perspective and problem-solving elements. 2007's *Conan* was an unremarkable third-person slash-em-up that was almost (but not quite) made memorable by casting Ron Perlman as the voice of the barbarian. The only game still in production (and currently available free on Steam) is Funcom's *Age of Conan: Unchained*, a MMORPG that's been around since 2008. Notable for its character generation engine and not much else, it still has a cult following. Though we hope that particular cult does not involve snakes.



Arnie. The movie was based on the Marvel Comics character Red Sonja, who is (very roughly) based on a character from Robert E. Howard, in a short story called *The Shadow of the Vulture*, which was in no way connected to his Conan stories. This didn't stop Marvel from setting their stories in Conan's world, and it didn't stop producer Dino De Laurentiis from making another Conan movie, despite lacking the rights to the character at the time. Schwarzenegger's character is called Lord Kalidor, despite looking and dressing like Conan. The movie heavily implies that it is Conan in disguise.

A poor script riddled with plot holes and homophobia led to the movie being critically panned and it is now quite painful to watch, despite the obvious appeal of the sword-twirling leads. A fourth movie, *Conan the Conqueror* was planned, but by now Arnie had fulfilled his contractual obligations and happily went off to appear in *Predator* instead. Despite the franchise being pretty much dead at this point, this did not deter Hollywood.

In 1997, the De Laurentiis family would take another swing at the project, using the *Conan the Conqueror* script to create the Kevin Sorbo vehicle, *Kull the Conqueror*. Though the plot was based on the Conan novel *The Hour of the Dragon*, Robert E. Howard's other barbarian hero, Kull was subbed in for the role. Sorbo didn't want to play a role so closely tied to Schwarzenegger. Thanks to a heap of script rewrites and a lack of budget, it sank without a trace.

2011's *Conan the Barbarian*, starring bare-chest for hire Jason Momoa, mostly suffered from studio interference. Despite mediocre performances in the Box Office, Conan is still seen as a hot property, and the project pinged across various studios' radar, including the likes of Warner Bros, New Line Cinema, Hollywood Gang, and Millennium Films. It was finally put together by three studios: Nu Image, Millennium, and Lionsgate. Despite Momoa's ability to outperform both the

likes of Schwarzenegger and Sorbo and an electrifying performance by Rose McGowan as the Witch Queen, the movie was a box office bomb, mostly due to an over-reliance on CGI and a bloody awful script.

Producers across Hollywood are still pursuing the Hyborian dream, as the 67-year-old Arnold Schwarzenegger continues to feign interest in being Conan again in a movie that would see an elderly version of the hero, burdened with responsibility. Scripts are being written and casting is being mooted, but at the time of writing, production is in a permanent state of delay.

Robert E. Howard would probably be quite pleased that writers are able to still scratch a living from his creation, though it does feel like the script has been in development for a very long time, and we may well have to wait a whole Hyborian Age before we see Conan on the silver screen again.





GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S A GAME OF THRONES™ THE BOARD GAME SECOND EDITION

Based on George R. R. Martin's bestselling novel series, *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game Second Edition* places 3-6 players in a struggle to claim dominance over Westeros. Fans of the first edition will find a host of enhancements, including convenient player screens and unpredictable Tides of Battle cards, while newcomers will appreciate *Second Edition's* clarified rules and stunning artwork. The time has never been better to claim the Iron Throne!

A Game of Thrones:
The Board Game Second Edition



WINTER IS STILL COMING...



BY ANDREW POLLARD



HBO'S STUNNING GAME OF THRONES (ON SKY ATLANTIC IN THE UK) RETURNS IN APRIL FOR ITS FIFTH SEASON. IN A SHOW THAT'S HIT SO MANY HIGH NOTES DURING ITS RUN, IT'S TIME TO LOOK AHEAD AT WHAT COULD BE ON THE HORIZON FOR THOSE CHARACTERS LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE SURVIVED THIS FAR...

Having debuted back in 2011, the TV adaptation of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is now in a slightly strange place; it's really not all that far from catching up to Martin's written work. Season 5 will pull inspiration from Martin's fourth and fifth books, *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, respectively. In the meantime, the author is scurrying away on getting *The Winds of Winter*, the sixth book of the seven-part series, finished. As such, Martin's usual one episode per season scripting gig has been vetoed by the writer so that he can focus his time on the books.

In terms of plot specifics, very little has been given away in terms of what we can definitely see in Season 5, although obviously those who are up to speed on the written tales will have an idea of what direction things will take. And it's most certainly not pretty for many faces. Much like *The Walking Dead*, another hugely successful genre show of recent years, it's often best with *Game of Thrones* to not get too attached to characters. It's with no sense of shame that we can admit that we're still struggling with the demise of Robb Stark during the whole Red Wedding escapade of the iconic

The Rains of Castamere episode way back in the penultimate entry in Season 3's run. Since then, Season 4 delivered some shocking and/or violent deaths for the likes of Ygritte, Shae, Lysa Arryn, The Hound, Tywin Lannister, King Joffrey, and most explosively (literally) the cock-sure loveable rogue that was Oberyn Martell. Death well and truly does come for us all at some point, but in *Game of Thrones* it often comes without warning and with a fierce brutality. With that, it will be interesting to see just who makes it to the end of Season 5 and in what state they are

in at that point. One thing that we do know for certain is that Kit Harington's Jon Snow is going to play a huge role going forward, although even his ultimate fate is up in the air at the moment. The only two characters who can be deemed anywhere near to safe are Kristian Nairn's Hodor and Isaac Hempstead-Wright's Bran Stark, who will not be appearing at all in Season 5 due to their characters' TV show arc being bang up to date with where their written incarnations find themselves.

In terms of locations, the bulk of Season 5 is expected to take place at King's Landing, Slaver's Bay, Dorne, and the ominous Wall. As mentioned, plot specifics are being kept extremely tight to cast and crew's chests, although as well as Jon Snow's arc we'll also see plenty of attention on the progression of Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) as her "pet" dragons start to become a tad headstrong. Always good to have a pig-headed "pet", especially when they can fly and breathe fire. Elsewhere, Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) will still be trying to find Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), with likely assistance from bad-guy-cum-good-guy Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). Then there's the small matter of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) and her quest to get some semblance of revenge for the deaths of so many family members, not to mention find any remaining kin.

Personally, we feel that one of the most compelling elements of *Game of Thrones* in recent seasons has been Ramsay Snow/Bolton (Iwan Rheon), who is an absolute bastard in every sense of the word. A truly despicable villain, Ramsay has a presence when on screen that hooks you in and has you waiting to see what vile act he's going to perform next. Whether anything can top the removal of poor Theon Greyjoy's (Alfie Allen) winkiness remains to be seen. Given how Ramsay's role is set to expand (unlike poor Theon's manhood) in Season 5, it could lead to some compelling, if not traumatising and unsettling, television.

With Season 5 having wrapped in December, it's a little surprising that some brief plot details haven't been leaked out at this stage. Still, that's half the fun of *Game of Thrones* – the anticipation and the suspense. Whilst it's only logical that this upcoming season will follow suit and stay true to the books that it's based on, it would be mightily remiss of us to mention too many details here as that would essentially ruin some compelling TV viewing for many. Still, safe to say, there's a lot more on the horizon for *Game of Thrones*. And as ever, the big question is who will be left standing when this season comes to an end. Not only that, what state will they be in and in what position of power, which ultimately so much of this comes down to, will they find themselves.

GAME OF THRONES returns to UK screens on April 13th, the day after its US debut.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

ALL THE NEWS
FROM THE WORLDS
OF DOCTOR WHO
WITH PAUL MOUNT



Series Nine

Series Nine of *Doctor Who* began production in January with a two-part story from Toby (Being Human) Whithouse confirmed as the first before the cameras. Derek Ritchie, who has previously script-edited for the series, produces the story and it's directed by series first-timer Daniel O'Hara, who has previously also worked on *Being Human*. The cast includes actor Paul Kaye, who appeared in the third series of the popular *Game of Thrones* and whose previous credits include *It's All Gone Pete Tong* and the recent vampire feature film *Dracula Untold*. Although other TV credits include *Spaced*, *Stella*, *Hustle* and *Silent Witness*, Kaye probably remains best known as the outrageous 1990s faux TV celebrity interviewer Dennis Pennis. Speaking about his role in *Doctor Who*, Kaye said: "As a kid of the 1970s the two shows you always watched were *Top of the Pops* and *Doctor Who* – they were unmissable. I got to present *Top of the Pops* back in the mid-90s and landing this role completes the double. Peter Capaldi is a perfect Doctor and I'm loving every minute of the experience – even the five hours in make-up!" Also appearing in the episodes are Morven Christie (seen recently in ITV's *Grantchester*), Arsher Ali from BBC One's recent much-acclaimed kidnap drama *The Missing* and Colin McFarlane who is no stranger to the *Doctor Who* Universe, having played General Pierce in the 2009 *Torchwood* mini-series *Children of Earth*. *Doctor Who* Series Nine, starring Peter Capaldi and Jenna Coleman, continues filming at the BBC Wales Studios in Cardiff's Roath Lock and on location around South Wales – with some location work rumoured to be undertaken later in the year in Spain.



DOCTOR WHO at Christmas: Final Ratings Update

Last month we reported on the slightly disappointing ratings performance of the 2014 Christmas episode *Last Christmas*, which achieved a final rating, including timeshift, of 8.28 million viewers, the lowest figure for a Festive special since the series returned in 2005. Figures from the BBC's iPlayer facility are now available and they, too, make for dispiriting reading. *Doctor Who*, which has topped the iPlayer charts for the last two Christmases, tumbled to ninth place in 2014 with the episode receiving 1.07 million iPlayer requests. By way of comparison, 2013's *Time of the Doctor*, which saw Matt Smith depart the series, received 1.96 requests and 2012's *The Snowmen* received 1.47 million. *Last Christmas* has a final current tally of 9.35 million viewers, with another 0.48 million recorded for BBC Three's Boxing Day repeat.

Desert Island Doctor

As *Doctor Who* devotees wait patiently (although, more often, impatiently) for news of any further missing episode recoveries, some solace can be taken from the recent announcement that a significant portion of a 1965 edition of the BBC Radio 4's long-running *Desert Island Discs*, featuring First Doctor William Hartnell, has been recovered. The series, which has been running since 1942, invites a celebrity to select eight pieces of music, a book, and a luxury item that they would choose to take with them if they were to be stranded on a desert island. The edition featuring Hartnell was broadcast in the UK in August 1965, unheard and unbroadcast since, and has been presumed lost for decades. A sixteen-minute extract has, however, now been recovered and restored and can be accessed via the BBC website. Although the recording does not feature Hartnell discussing his then-current work on *Doctor Who*, he talks to presenter Roy Plomley about his early career and his influences. His musical choices include *The Spring Song* from *A King in New York* by Charlie Chaplin, and his luxury item is cigarettes.



DOCTOR WHO LEGO!

The BBC has announced that a LEGO **Doctor Who** set will be released later this year. The concept for a **Doctor Who** set came from the LEGO® IDEAS website, where fans can submit ideas for a set and vote for their favourite idea to be produced. The **Doctor Who** concept from fan Andrew Clark received the 10,000 votes required for The LEGO Group to consider it for production. A licensing agreement between BBC Worldwide and The LEGO Group will see the new set available in all of The LEGO Group's key markets before the end of the year.

Andrew's winning design featured a range of Doctors, companions and monsters across the show's history, but fans will have to wait until later this year to discover what will be manufactured. Marcus Arthur, MD of BBC Worldwide UK said, "Both **Doctor Who** and LEGO enjoy a particularly close relationship with their fans and I can't wait to see what LEGO produce."

Emma Owen, UK spokesperson for LEGO® IDEAS commented: "We're extremely excited to announce that a **Doctor Who** and a **WALL-E** set will be released as our next LEGO Ideas fan-based sets, congratulations to the designers Andrew Clark and Angus MacLane!"

"After receiving over 10,000 votes from the online community and having gone through rigorous toy testing from our expert panel, these awesome sets are on track to be on shelves later this year. The final set designs, pricing and availability are being worked out as we speak, so watch this space for the final details!"

Doctor Who in Lego? Awesome, we think you'll agree...

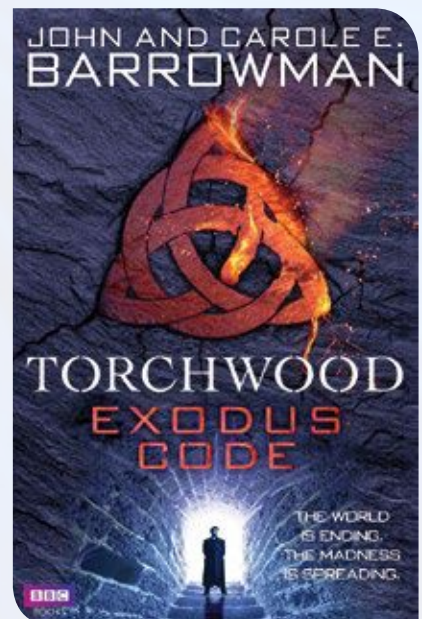
Obituary

Halifax-born actor Barrie Ingham passed away on January 23rd at the age of 82. A popular British character actor from the 1960s until his death, Barrie appeared in episodes of **The Avengers**, **Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)** and **The Power Game** as well as American series such as **Remington Steele**, **Murder She Wrote**, and **The A-Team**. He also appeared as Danilo Odell in the 1989 **Star Trek: The Next Generation** episode *Up the Long Ladder*. To **Doctor Who** fans he will be remembered for his role as Paris in the 1965 serial *The Myth Makers* (currently missing from the BBC Archives) and as Alydon, the Thal, in the colourful 1965 feature film **Dr. Who and the Daleks** starring Peter Cushing. Ingham enthusiastically recalled his work on the film in the 1995 documentary **Dalekmania**, which appears on the DVD/Blu-ray release of **Dr. Who and the Daleks**.



TORCHWOOD Reborn!

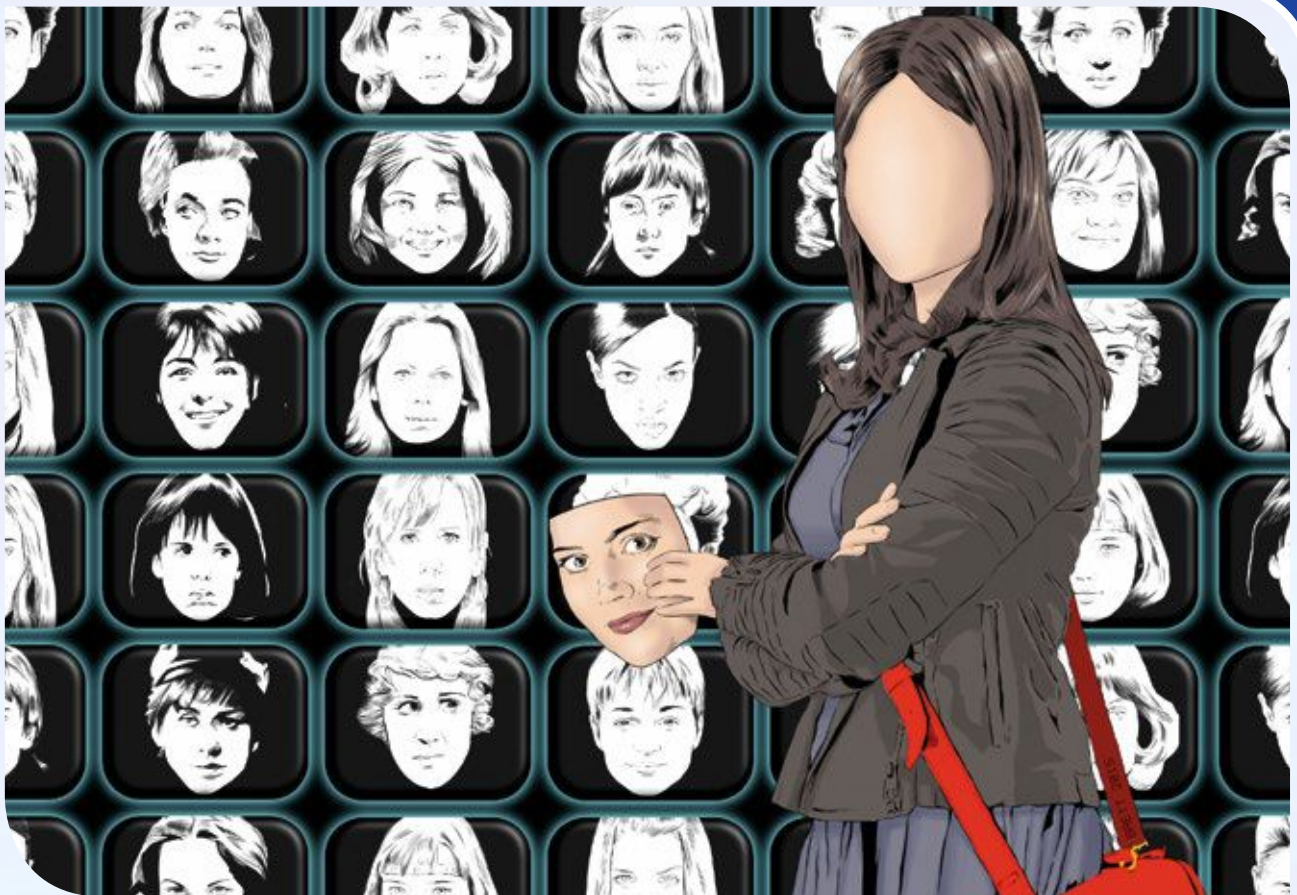
Following the fairly disastrous American co-production series **Miracle Day** in 2011, it appeared that **Doctor Who** spin-off **Torchwood** was dead in the water, its star John Barrowman having now taken up a full-time role as Malcolm Merlyn in American superhero series **Arrow**. It now appears that the show may be making a limited comeback as a BBC radio series which *could* pave the way for the show's return to television. Speaking during the 2015 Press Tour hosted by the Television Association, Barrowman revealed that a three or four-episode radio project is in development and that he and his sister Carole, with whom he has written a number of acclaimed children's books as well as the **Torchwood** novel *Exodus Code*, are discussing the possibility of writing one of the episodes. Barrowman gave no indication of the format or cast for the dramas if they go ahead, but did tease that at least one of the episodes would feature the "full" **Torchwood** cast; fans will remember that original series cast members Tosh (Naoko Mori), Owen (Burn Gorman) and Ianto (Gareth David-Lloyd) were killed off during the original run of the series. **Torchwood** creator



Russell T Davies and former **Doctor Who**/**Torchwood** executive producer Julie Gardner are also rumoured to be involved in the development of the project.

WATCHING DOCTOR WHO

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK
AT THE WHONIVERSE
BY JR SOUTHALL



With Series Eight, *Doctor Who* has come a strange kind of full circle. Back in 1963, the series told the story of two teachers who stumble upon the TARDIS and join the Doctor on his adventures – and at least initially, the adventures were told from their perspective. In 2014, it was the first Doctor of a new regeneration cycle, but once again, the key focus of the ongoing storyline was the relationship between two teachers.

Doctor Who has never really been about the Doctor. In many ways, it can't be. All drama is the story of characters and how they develop, and *Doctor Who* nowadays is no different. It's problem is that if the central character were to develop beyond a certain point, the drama would be finished and the reason for telling stories gone. So the character of the Doctor is more or less on ice, and beyond the first Doctor's initial mellowing, any development is primarily engendered

in the people who travel with him.

In the 1960s, and particularly following the departure of Ian and Barbara, such character growth was more or less dispensed with, and tended to involve the regulars merely as witnesses to or commentators upon the action. Even Frazer Hines as Jamie, whose introduction brought about a shift in the tone in the series, was very rarely involved in events in anything but a reactive sense. Other companions of the period, from Vicki to Steven to Victoria, were simply there to facilitate exposition and the occasional resolution.

The 1970s saw certain improvements being made, with the companions still asking questions and getting into bother, but beginning with Liz and continuing right up as far as Romana, the reason for this was now down to an independence of spirit. Sarah Jane Smith would never twist her ankle in order to allow a subplot to develop; she'd be off investigating circumstances herself, with or without the

Doctor's blessing. Jo Grant was probably the first companion to undergo true development, and the character that faces up to the Master in *Frontier in Space* is a far cry from the ham-fisted bun vendor of *Terror of the Autons*.

In an effort to further develop the role of the companions in the 1980s, an odd but interesting tangent was instead arrived at. Equating strong characterisation with heavily defined attributes, the decade produced a succession of single-characteristic companions none of whom ever really came alive as people. Maths Boy, the gobby Aussie, the demure princess, the impotent assassin, the whiney Yank and the Doctor's project were all interesting characters on paper, but in practice, it was hard for audiences to truly engage with them.

In 2005, characters who fail to connect with the viewers wouldn't have made the revamped series viable, so Russell T Davies took his cue partly from the TV Movie and

partly from the "Professor's Apprentice" Ace, and created a shop girl whose defining motivations were the need to escape a humdrum life and an increasing emotional dependency upon the Doctor himself. Davies also gave his title character a new stimulus in the form of a destroyed Gallifrey, which allowed the now doubly itinerant Time Lord room for some development of his own. Unfortunately, Davies never really saw past these two characters, and with the exception of Donna Noble, his five years running the series didn't get beyond the Lonely God and the unrequitable love of his companion – usually Rose.

Steven Moffat's *Doctor Who* has been defined by a desire to learn from the shortcomings of the past and to deal with some of its core conceits in a more lateral fashion. After half a decade of the Doctor being a broken object of desire, Moffat craftily swung the pendulum the other way, firstly by *appearing* to carry on the tradition, before (and this after only five episodes) allowing matters to come to a head in such a manner as to cause the characters to go running in the opposite direction. There may be occasional instances of apparently flirtatious dialogue – and with two such attractive leads it would have been wilful to ignore the potential chemistry between them – but such moments served only to underline Rory's position as Amy's husband. The onscreen dynamic throughout the Eleventh Doctor's tenure is one of great friends running headlong into dangerous situations; a mirror held up to the sixth series of the original run, in which the Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe behaved in much the same way.

As the creator of *Coupling* and *Joking Apart*, series inspired by events in his own life and therefore reflective of real people and situations (albeit in a heightened manner), it would have been a mistake not to have expected Moffat to introduce some kind of complicated, sexually charged relationship drama into *Doctor Who* (and the BBC would have expected nothing less when employing him). Rather than allow this aspect of his writing to infringe upon



the established formula of *Doctor Who* – in spite of his innovations in the texture of the series, Moffat is too much of a traditionalist to introduce this kind of thing into the show's inbuilt format – he instead created a peripheral character in order to give the Doctor a focus beyond the confines of what had gone before.

Enter River Song, perhaps the most tragic pseudo-companion the series has ever produced. Donna, Jamie and Zoe might all have had the majority of their experiences with the Doctor wiped from their memories, but the tragedy there is in our own perceptions of the characters, rather than in anything the characters can recognise themselves. River Song's temporally non-consecutive romance with the Eleventh Doctor is her real misfortune; it's obvious from the way he behaves in *The Angels Take Manhattan* that the relationship is anything but consummated, and throughout the sixth and seventh series, Alex Kingston plays the character as someone who behaves as if there is more to the relationship than she has ever managed to attain. It's a story that can only be told via time-travelling; River might attempt to encourage the entirely sexually naïve Doctor into realising the love that only she truly feels, but she knows deep

down that by meeting him out of sequence, she can never really affect this change. She's like a version of Martha who can see the Doctor returning her interest, but can never actually have it.

Steven Moffat has also made one other innovation to the format, that this year has produced spectacular results. Throughout Series Seven, we saw the companions enjoying a double life as occasional travellers who still managed to maintain a life on Earth. Having introduced Clara as a character who began her journey in such a way, Moffat expanded this aspect of the show into Series Eight, in which the new Doctor's development is brought about through his involvement with Clara and her stay-at-home boyfriend Danny Pink. Superficially, the *Doctor Who* of 2014 appears to be the story of Clara and Danny – and that's part of it. But Steven Moffat's real achievement here is in allowing, by ostensibly relegating the new Doctor's self-doubt to what is apparently a subplot, a proper sense of character development in the eponymous hero. By making the Twelfth Doctor one who questions not just the manner of his existence but his right to even exist in the first place, Steven Moffat has used Series Eight as a vessel within which to take Peter Capaldi's Doctor on an actual journey the likes of which we have never seen in *Doctor Who* before.

In many ways, Clara is the classic companion we never saw, except perhaps with Jo Grant and Sarah Jane Smith. A woman who travels for the delight of it (and latterly the *need* to do it), rather than because she is in love with the Doctor, or because she has become trapped on the TARDIS and has no other life to go back to. By making *Doctor Who* like no *Doctor Who* that has ever been made before, Steven Moffat has sneakily upheld the traditions of the show in a way that we didn't even notice. His Doctor is fundamentally asexual (the kiss with Missy was simply a way of forestalling on any future revelation of their being siblings), and his companions travel for the journey rather than for the Doctor. He has, in a sense, given us the best of both worlds.





THEOLOGICAL STRUGGLES OF THE DOCTOR

Let us begin with a question. What is one of the longest running and most divisive/controversial reasons for man taking up arms? The Doctor inevitably knows the answer - he was thrust into the heat of battle between the Christian forces of Richard the Lionheart and those of the Muslim Saracen Sultan Saladin, during the Third Crusade as part of his First incarnation (*The Crusade*); one of the earliest known examples of religious conflict.

Why was it fought? The issue was one of access to the Holy Land; Saladin had regained control of it during the Second such skirmish after the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Urban II, had actively backed the First.

"That Saracen very nearly did for me. Of course... Did you hear what that man called him? Malek Ric! Yes, that was the name the Saracens had for King Richard, Coeur de Lion. Malek Ric."...

Fast forward three selves for the Doctor and this sense of religious conflict once again permeates *The Masque Of Mandragora*. This time, science is the enemy as the Renaissance begins to take hold in fifteenth century Italy, but a force from the stars wants to drag the state of things back into the Dark Ages! With the help of a willing ally, Hieronymous,

astrologer to the court of San Martino, the Mandragora Helix - an entity reliant on the very art Hieronymous (who also moonlights as leader of the Cult of Demnos - the Roman God of the Moon) practices as a source of power - sets about its mission; in the process, persuading the astrologer to switch his loyalties from Demnos to itself as part of

a plot to take Earthly power by means of the establishment of a new religion!

Conveniently, this comes almost at the exact point in time when the gods are just beginning to be superseded by men like Leonardo da Vinci, who will later crop up as an unseen guest at a ball to mark Federico's ascension to San Martino's



duchy. The Doctor will meet him again, sort of, in *City Of Death*. "Leonardo? Leonardo? Ah, that Renaissance sunshine. Leonardo? The paintings went down very well. Everybody loved them. Last Supper, Mona Lisa. You remember the Mona Lisa? That dreadful woman with no eyebrows who wouldn't sit still, eh? Your idea for the helicopter took a bit longer to catch on, but as I say, these things take time."

Count Federico, seen at the start of the story as brother to the dying Duke himself, lusts after power and uses 'predictions' made by Hieronymous to foretell the deaths of those standing in the way of his goal. "Everything is foretold by the stars. I am just a humble astrologer. I only interpret their meaning." They then (perhaps predictably) die at the hands of Federico's personal guard. He'll later become the victim of many a bitter employee's fantasy when he's killed by the very star-mapper he's entrusted to help him carry out his plans...

We know now of the man of religion, in a sense, but what of his opposite in the field of science? This is the point at which Federico's nephew Giuliano, the true heir to San Martino's duchy, enters proceedings. He's a liberal thinker as well as maintaining an interest in matters scientific - "Well, there's this man in Florence who claims that by arranging ground glasses in a certain order, it's possible to see the Moon and the stars as large as your hand." - no wonder he's drawn to the Doctor, a traveller from beyond the stars of an altogether more pleasant nature than Mandragora, which has chosen an ideal power base for its schemes by promising him 'special powers' as 'Ruler over all the Earth'.

And there's no mistaking his contempt



for the new scientific creed, either; "For years, the wise fools, the scholars of the new knowledge, have jeered and scoffed at me. The old Duke tolerated me but did not believe. Count Federico despises me. The young Duke considers me of no consequence. But they will learn their mistake, priest. They will learn their mistake as they die".

There's also the small matter of *The King's Demons*, in which the Fifth Doctor is able to discern that something is amiss with regards to one 'Bad' King John. Arriving in 1215 on the very day history records that the monarch was taking the Crusaders' Oath, a pledge of loyalty to the aims of the same

conflict he'd found himself part of when cricket gear was possibly but a pipe dream & his hair was considerably whiter!

In return for swearing the Oath, "I do so swear under the Light, by the Sword and Scales of Truth and all the fires of heaven, to undertake this holy Crusade. I pledge to guard heart, spirit, body, and mind from the corruption of this Wound upon the World. I furthermore promise and declare that I shall wage relentless war against the Spawn of the Pit and their manifold legions, as directed by those with charge of this Crusade and whenever opportunity presents, to extirpate and annihilate their execrable race and any who serve them". Those who fought were promised forgiveness for past sins.

But of course, the King cannot possibly be in two places at once. Enter Kamelion, the handy robot of the Master - also known here initially by the alias of 'Sir Gilles Estram', the King's champion! Five selves later, in a roundabout manner, the Tenth Doctor will bear witness to the rise of the Beast, a being claiming to be the living embodiment of the very 'Spawn of the Pit' the Crusaders had sworn to combat all those years ago.

Even before that, his Third incarnation saw off the might of *The Daemons*, or at least one of them in the devilish form of Azal - in whose summoning the Master had a hand under the guise of 'Reverend Magister' (the Latin form of 'Master'). Their physical appearance serving as the inspiration behind mankind's many legends of the Devil, Satan, or whichever of his many names you choose to call him by. "Now, creatures like those have been seen over and over again throughout the history of man, and man has turned them into myths, gods or devils, but they're neither. They are, in fact, creatures from another world."

And Azal has a particularly low opinion of the human race; seen as little more than an experiment by his own kind! "This planet smells to me of failure. It may be that I shall destroy it." Religion, eh?

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



REVIEWS

NEW WHO RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED



THE SEVENTH DOCTOR SOURCEBOOK

AUTHOR: ANDREW PEREGRINE
PUBLISHER: WIZARDS OF THE COAST
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Cubicle 7's Doctor Who Adventures in Time and Space Roleplaying Game concentrates on the current TV series.

This makes sense; if you're shopping for a new Doctor Who game, you probably want one with the newer Doctor on the cover. This doesn't mean that the previous incarnations don't deserve the love and The Seventh Doctor Sourcebook attempts to redress the balance by being all about Sylvester McCoy's sneaky Time Lord.

The Seventh Doctor Sourcebook can be seen as a very specific sort of series guide in a way. Author Andrew Peregrine takes apart the themes and ideas behind one the most controversial runs of Doctor Who in the show's history, but does so with one goal in mind. Peregrine takes the show apart in order to allow you, the gamer, to run your own stories all about the Seventh Doctor.

We get a breakdown of the Seventh Doctor's set-up, from his lack of TARDIS use to his relationship with UNIT, all the way to a section called 'Games Mastering The Magician', that provides suggestions for working the most duplicitous and subtle incarnation of The Doctor into an evening's worth of table-top roleplaying. His companions and enemies are given full stats and also plenty of story seeds for the potential games masters to work from.

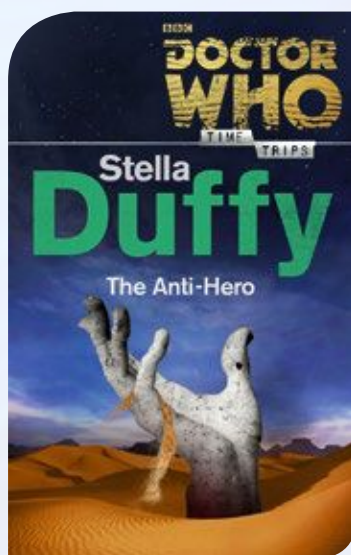
The main attraction, of course, is the series guide. The book dissects each episode in order to see what makes

them tick, and doesn't back away from a hard task. Ever wanted to see Remembrance of The Daleks from the side of one of the Dalek factions? An extensive list is available. Do you want to make the Dragon from Dragonfire a little less lame, or make Sabalom Glitz a companion? Done. Of course, the biggest challenge is making Ghost Light playable, and an admirable effort is made at unpicking this particular story and making it into a game. Each episode of McCoy's run is covered, and all the elements (and people) from the show are given space. The book does not replace familiarity with the core material, but it's a very good companion and is filled with pretty photos from the show.

It does miss the mark on occasion. For example, it strongly discourages use of Ace's trademark Nitro-9 rather than using it as the storytelling device it really is, and the book leans more toward simulation than narrative-style play than perhaps most people who play Doctor Who Adventures in Time and Space Roleplaying Game would like. Still, it's a solid book and a good companion to a frequently discussed era of the show.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★ 8



DOCTOR WHO: THE ANTI-HERO

AUTHOR: STELLA DUFFY / PUBLISHER: BBC
BOOKS (E-BOOK) / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

The TARDIS deposits the Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe at the legendary ancient Museum of Alexandria in the year 50 AD where they find themselves caught up in the intrigues of the genius Hero and his artificial robotic Muses. Zoe's search for astronomical enlightenment and Jamie's quest for a recipe for perfect porridge could well turn out to be the downfall for all three of our time travellers...

This latest entry in the BBC's occasional 'Time Trips' E-book series, written by novelist and playwright Stella Duffy, is a quirky, good-natured affair. But fans yearning for an old-fashioned atmospheric Second Doctor yarn are likely to be a little disappointed as the forty-odd page story bears little or no resemblance to any Doctor Who serial from the 1960s and the TARDIS crew are only vaguely recognisable as the characters seen on TV forty-odd years ago. The Doctor is occasionally puckish and quixotic, Zoe displays some of her familiar scientific aloofness but, with his bagpipe-playing and previously unexpressed passion for porridge, Jamie is only a deep-fried Mars Bar away from being an embarrassing Scottish cliché.

Duffy clearly knows her Greek mythology

and her depiction of the nine Muses who are said to be the inspiration for literature, science and the arts - albeit as robot replicas created by Hero and later as benevolent visiting saving-the-day aliens - allows her to steer the Doctor and co. into the previously uncharted waters of the classical arts. It's not an altogether successful combination, as the story is so massively untypical of the Doctor Who era it plays with, but there's some fun to be had with Duffy's playful dialogue and a scenario which does at least manage to put the TARDIS crew in mild peril before the misguided 'bad guy' Hero decides to see the error of his ways without much real excitement or serious character conflict.

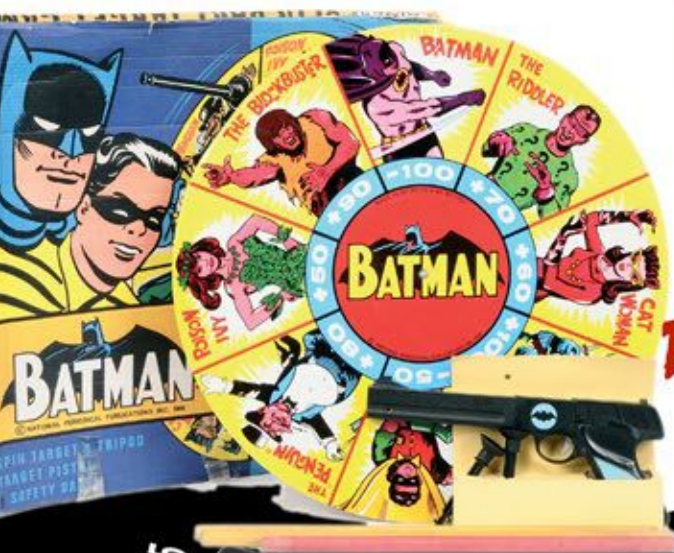
'The Anti-Hero' won't trouble you for long and if its depiction of the Troughton-era is hugely off-kilter - there's not a Cyberman or a base-under-siege in sight - it's good to see that the BBC are still willing to allow writers to play with characters last seen on TV years before most of the range's readers were even born. Breezily inoffensive.

PAUL MOUNT

★★★★★★★ 6

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LIVVY BOOTE is...

THE GIRL FROM X PLANET X

When *Star Trek* aired in 1966, it was enormously progressive - but what about now? Is its future of equality still inspirational for women? Does it still have the power to make people - *everyone* - dream to boldly go where no man (*cough* no one *cough*) has gone before?

Well, for those watching it for the first time in the 21st century, there are certainly things which still stick out. Uhura, for example, a black woman and the Enterprise's communication officer, is probably the coolest woman in the universe. When Whoopi Goldberg was a child, she apparently cried, "*Come quick! Come quick! There's a black lady on TV, and she ain't no maid!*", and I daresay her character still has the same effect for some people, even in 2015. Not that that's necessarily a good thing; it only proves how little society has progressed in terms of racial issues and women's rights in working environments. Then again, it's also important to recognise and celebrate the fact that *Star Trek* still offers a realistic range of female characters, where many shows in the 21st century don't.

As well as Uhura, you have all these other kick-ass ladies working on the Enterprise, which is a great thing in itself, since the USS Enterprise is an enormously important vessel, set out to discover worlds beyond the boundaries of human knowledge. It's the frontline of scientific discovery, and the fact that there are all these awesome women doing their part

on an expedition like that is *still* great to see- and back in the '60s, it was probably quite shocking. You have the yeoman Janice Rand, Christine Chapel, the psychologist Dr Helen Noel, Pike's first officer Number One - the list goes on. And what's best is that the women aren't all white, either. For the 1960s, that's really good representation. Hell, for 2015, that's good representation!

There are some great heroines and villains off-board the Enterprise, too. The Vulcan queen T'Pol is a pretty scary lady, and Elaan of Troyius doesn't take any crap from anyone, especially the men of her species. And then there's the Romulan commander from the episode *The Enterprise Incident* - OK, to avoid this article becoming a long list of awesome *Star Trek* women, let's just stop there and get to the point.

Yes, *Star Trek* has loads of amazing ladies. But they're certainly not without their issues, and the way the show deals with them is often flawed.

Going back to the female Romulan



Top left: Lieutenant Nyota Uhura; Top right: Dr Helen Noel; Bottom left: Number 1; Bottom right; Yeoman Tamura. *Star Trek* shows that it's possible to have a range of interesting, varied female characters.

Commander - first problem, she isn't even *named*. The second, far bigger problem is the way Spock tricks her with his Vulcan flirting. Understandably, she's mighty pissed off by this. If you had gained the respect and power she had, only to be seduced and duped by some pointed-eared hobgoblin (to use Bones' terms), you would be! True, we're not supposed to feel too bad for her, since she's Romulan and all, but that's pretty low, Spock.

All of the women seem to get tangled into a damaging romantic plotline. Damaging in the sense that they die, are broken-hearted, or are assaulted. The evil cat lady Sylvia from *Catpaw* is romanced and tricked by Kirk, and is pretty unimpressed about it. Kirk has this ability to seduce every woman in the universe and use his sexuality to his benefit. Female villains often have this attribute too, so perhaps there isn't as much sexism in Kirk's sexual conquests as is generally thought - then again, when women use sex as a weapon, they're evil temptresses. When Kirk does it, he's a charming hero.

Anyway - practically *all* the women in *Star Trek* are sucked into some toxic love story, and it would take forever to give every example so here are just a couple. Lt. Marla McGivers is practically Khan's servant in *Space Seed*, and suffers some pretty horrible emotional abuse from it. In *The Enemy Within*, yeoman Rand is assaulted by an evil version of Kirk. She



Christopher: A woman? Kirk: A crewman.

STAR TREK - THE ORIGINAL SERIES, is it Still Relevant?

doesn't know it isn't the real (well... whole) Kirk, and feels like she'll get into trouble for having any sort of romantic relation with her captain, yet feels obliged not to anger him. She even tells Kirk, "I don't want to get you into trouble. I wouldn't have even mentioned it!" This sort of outlook on assault still remains, and it's seriously problematic because it implies that the perpetrator shouldn't be punished; that it's somehow the victim's fault. Yes, this was the '60s, so it isn't really surprising that this problem didn't occur to the writers - but, well... it makes it very uncomfortable for a modern, feminist audience to watch.

Alongside that, there are the frustrating gender stereotypes. Very often in *Star Trek* characters seem determined to affirm their gender, especially the men. In *Bread and Circuses*, Claudius Marcus becomes more and more impressed with Kirk's bold, 'Roman' behaviour, and so he starts calling him a man, over and over - to the point where it's really obvious and makes the dialogue weirdly stilted. It's as if the word man means more than being male, but also, just, *better*; perhaps in the '60s it made more sense, but for some 21st century viewers, the whole scenario just feels a little odd. That being said, this sort of mind-set remains - that's why people are still called girls as an insult - so it isn't surprising in the slightest that it exists in *Star Trek*. But when you think about it rationally, it doesn't make sense within the context of the *Star Trek* universe - because it's a universe where everyone is supposedly equal, men and women included.



Elaan of Troyius doesn't care for your sexist bullshit.
Elaan of Troyius is not delicate.



Kirk makes out with another hot alien lady

Kirk doesn't seem to respond to Claudius' compliments, so perhaps he doesn't agree with what he's implying (although he didn't exactly take the opportunity to argue with him. Probably wasn't the right time anyway). However, Kirk is also guilty of the same need to define people's gender, to separate men from women. In *The Conscience of the King*, crazy lady/actress Lenore asks him if working aboard the Enterprise has, "Made them just people instead of women" - and he responds with the romantic words, "Worlds may change, galaxies disintegrate, but a woman always remains a woman."

What does that even mean?

To be fair, to argue against gender

roles and the ideals attached to being a man and a woman would have been way ahead of its time, even for *Star Trek*. Equality meant something different - men and women could work together, but a man was still definitely a man, and a woman always remains a woman, and they'd be expected to behave in manly or womanly ways. Not that it's a bad thing for women to want to be feminine and men to want

to be masculine, but *Star Trek's* habit of enforcing gender roles is out-dated.

So yes, there's plenty that can make a 21st century audience incredibly uncomfortable, but it's important to remember the good stuff too. You have a variety of female characters being given the opportunity to do great things. There's the really obvious abortion metaphor in *The Mark of Gideon*, which is a taboo subject now, let alone in the '60s.

There's plenty of feminist debate in *Friday's Child*; McCoy decides it's his duty to ignore the Prime Directive and save a pregnant woman by dragging her away from a fight, even though it's against the law for any man to touch her except for her husband. When she persistently refuses to let him check on the child, slapping him every time he tries to touch her, eventually he slaps her back. This is *still* relevant - is it arrogant for the western world to assume we can invade struggling countries and help them? And does hitting a woman back mean you're treating them as equals, or does it mean you're using equality as an excuse to hit people at all?

There are so many episodes we could consider, but that would take forever so let's leave it with this: *Star Trek* was way ahead of its time in the '60s, but there are issues which didn't occur to the writers at the time but are problematic for a modern audience. So - can we still call the original series of *Star Trek* feminist despite its flaws?

Well, call it what you like, but regardless of its faults, it's *definitely* made its mark in the history of feminism and it's *definitely* still relevant.

MORE REBELLIOUS YOUTH

by John Townsend

A surprise hit last year, the first adaptation of VERONICA ROTH's *DIVERGENT* series of books paved the way for the YA series to continue on screen. *STARBURST* looks forward to the second in the saga, *INSURGENT*...

Once upon a time *Great Expectations* (1860) was considered young adult fiction, a genre traditionally targeted at those between the ages of 12 years and 18 years. Now, more than 150 years later, YA is still hugely popular and the cinematic counterparts to the novels vie for domination of the box office against an abundance of comic book heroes. With three major contenders due for release this year, 2015 is set to be the biggest and bloodiest yet in this highly lucrative and fiercely competitive market. *Insurgent*, the second release from the *Divergent* series, is the first to strike; and is possibly the one with the most to prove.

Following Tris (Shailene Woodley) as she continues her fight against a powerful and now more allied state *Insurgent* promises to be much darker in tone than its predecessor. Hopefully, it will also distance itself from the somewhat formulaic inflection that plagued *Divergent* and led to it receiving mixed and uninspiring reviews. One of the major issues that faced the original was how to handle





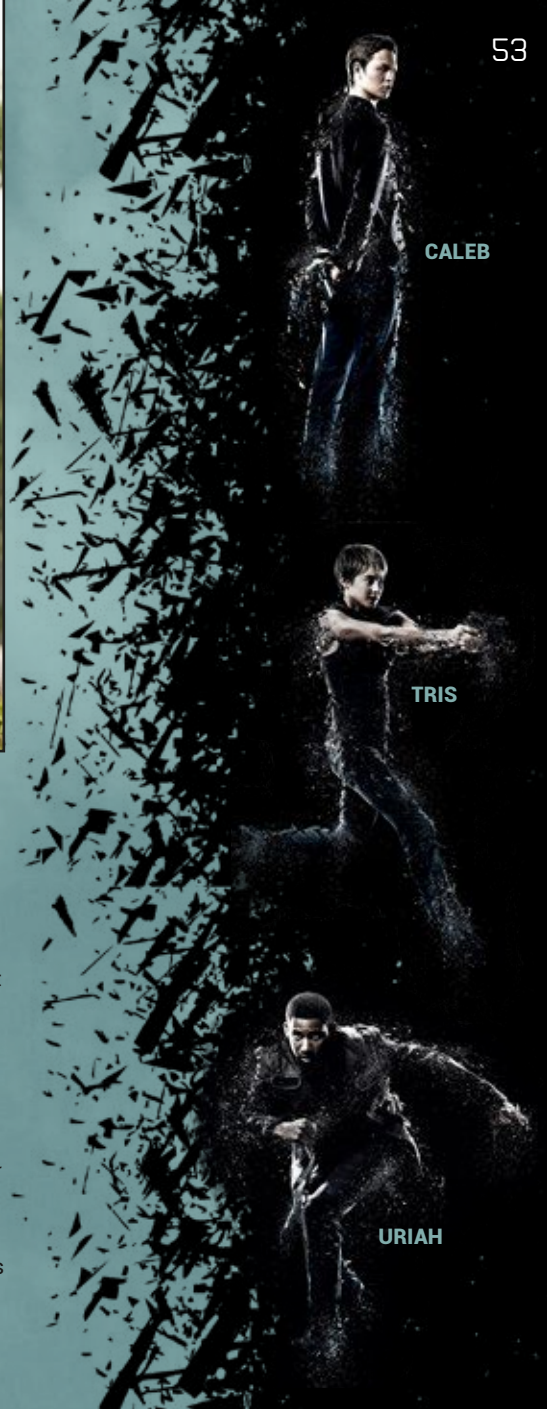
the sheer volume of information it needed to extol on audiences, many of whom will have been unfamiliar with Veronica Roth's novels. This film will be bound by no such commitments and should therefore be able to focus on story and character, while reaffirming the source novel's primary themes. Once again, rebellion, bravery and courage will be to the fore; but for Tris, there will be an almost unbearable combination of guilt, forgiveness, and love. Perhaps adding more personable and relatable traits to a central character that initially struggled to shine under the very imposing shadow of one Katniss Everdeen.

A criticism often voiced regarding *Divergent* was its generic adherence to YA conventions leading to a plodding and predictable plot. It could be said that many of the characters were as formulaic and stereotypical as the inhabitants of each of the curiously named factions, and that few were given enough time to develop, their motives and intentions bluntly stated rather than justified in the story. As the difficult bridging novel in the trilogy (although predictably the final film will be split in half), *Insurgent* was reassuringly well received and with many of the characters returning, little set-up will be required allowing storylines to develop and flow with more time and attention. Certainly as a war between the remaining factions looms large on the bleak horizon, we can expect little in the way of light relief, with angst and emotional isolation continuing to be strong YA themes. And while this film may ultimately leave questions more than provide answers, the filmmakers will hope that it will appeal to a wider audience and ensure a strong fan base leading in to the concluding episodes.

It is interesting to note that while *Divergent* returned a worldwide box office of \$289 million against its \$85 million budget, making it a reasonable success, its main rivals for the powerful teenage market, *The Maze Runner* and *The Hunger Games*:

Mockingjay, did considerably better. The former amassed \$341 million from a \$34 million budget while the popularity of the latter continues to soar, earning a massive \$715 million from an admittedly greater investment of \$125 million. Being first out of the dystopian blocks could well be to *Insurgent*'s benefit however, having no direct rival around its scheduled March release date and avoiding the main blockbuster season, which seems to expand with every passing year. What can be said with some certainty, is that *Insurgent* and the follow up to *The Maze Runner*, *The Scorch Trials* will be hoping to attract new fans and capitalise on the fact that there will be no more *Hunger Games* films after this year. Each will be hoping to fill that gap in the cinema-going lives of the YA market.

Much of the promise of *Insurgent* comes from additions and changes both in front of and behind the camera. Naomi Watts joins the already strong cast as Evelyn Johnson-Eaton, the suspiciously motivated leader of





the factionless, and *Divergent* director Neil Burger has left, being replaced at the helm by Robert Schwentke. With past credits including *Flightplan* and *Red*, Schwentke has shown he understands action and drama, while successfully managing big name stars (although perhaps not so much comedy with *R.I.P.D.* hanging heavy on the shoulders of all involved with that film). Watts and Schwentke should add some extra dramatic weight to a cast that includes the returning Kate Winslet and Miles Teller (currently starring in the Oscar-nominated *Whiplash*), and who perhaps didn't deliver as well as could have been expected first time around. It certainly felt while viewing that, Woodley aside, many performances were more listless than factionless.

Speaking of the film's young lead, as with Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games*, the greatest asset this series has is Shailene Woodley. Still relatively inexperienced as an actor, she grows and develops with each role, showing range and ability with key involvement in *The Descendants* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. The success of this franchise may rest firmly on her shoulders, but if Schwentke can draw the emotionally strong yet flawed performance required for *Insurgent*, then there are reasons to be optimistic.

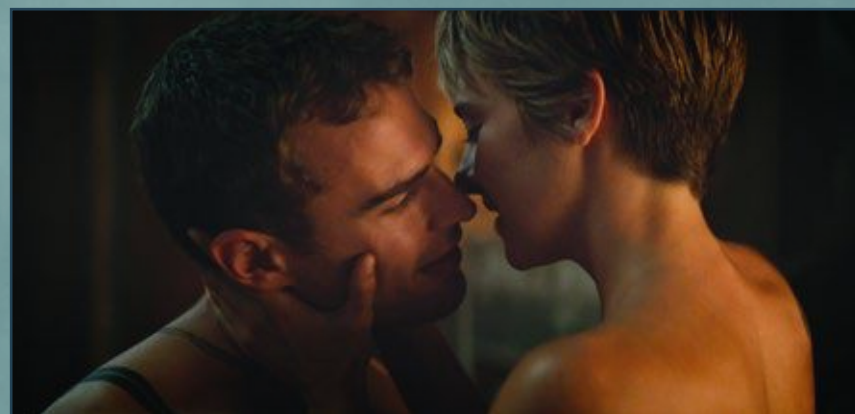
The greatest challenge facing *Insurgent* though will be the quest to establish its own identity. *The Maze Runner* had a

fun, energetically infectious appeal with cleverly dispersed humour and *The Hunger Games* is, well, *The Hunger Games*. This series needs to determine where it lies in relation to its rivals in order for the final instalment(s) not merely footnotes to films that promised much but ultimately were found wanting in the final reckoning. There is much to be hopeful of, though, and if the combination of Schwentke and Woodley succeeds, *Insurgent* could be the film that ensures this series goes some way to filling the huge void that will appear once Katniss' exploits are concluded.

What is certain is that 2015 will be crucial in the YA market. Only *The Hunger Games* series has managed to maintain a high standard across its films so far in this genre (*Twilight* grew increasingly preposterous over its lifespan) and there is every chance that with the finale this year this is a genre that may begin to lose its audience. To ensure that doesn't happen, *Insurgent* needs to deliver on the novel's success, developing a more immersive story while retaining the strengths of *Divergent*. With Schwentke in charge, there is every reason to believe this will be the case and *Insurgent* could well be one of the revelations of the year.



THE DIVERGENT SERIES: INSURGENT opens in UK cinemas on March 20th.



CHRISTINA

FOUR

PETER

MAX

TORI

HORROR

Obscura

This month, the manipulating Martin Vnsworth settles down in amongst the rats and fleas of the scuzziest picture house to enjoy a forgotten piece of cinematic exploitation.

Heavy Petting



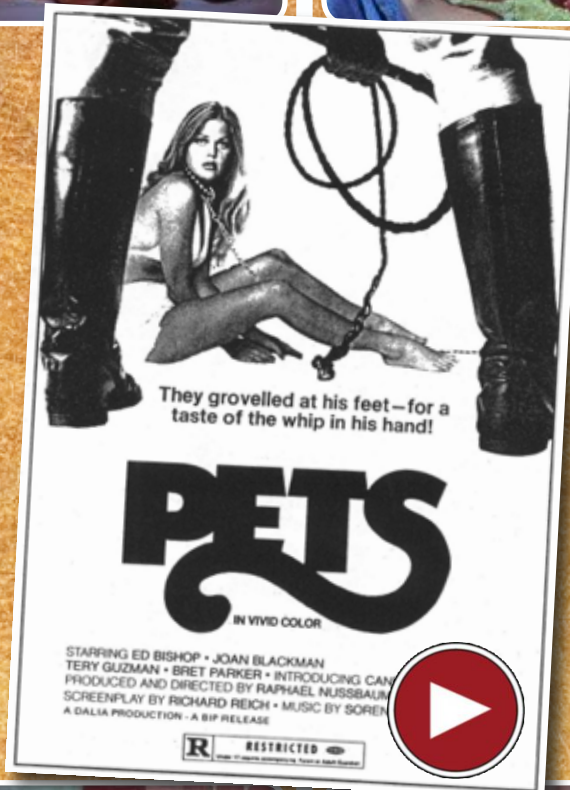
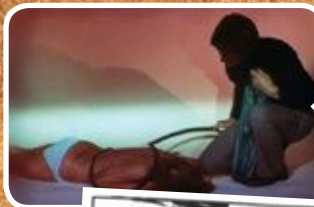
Many of the films that emerged from the 'grindhouse' scene were sleazy, nasty, cheaply-made and wholly inappropriate. But that's not to say there aren't some cinematic gems in amongst the trash. Indeed, even the worst of the bunch have some merit as entertainment, even when seen through a revisionist eye. The problem with many films from this era is the subject matter, and their portrayal, conflict with today's sensibilities. It's worth looking back occasionally in order to find some diamonds in the rough.

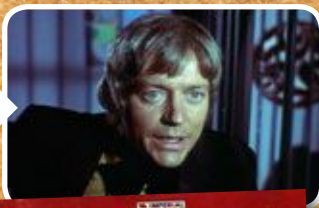
A rarely-seen and highly provocative film which fits perfectly into this mould is the 1974 film *Pets*. Directed by Raphael Nussbaum, it stars Candice Rialson as Bonnie, who we see in the pre-credits sequence running away from her abusive brother. On the road with no money and no friends, her inexperience

is plain to see. While taking advantage of a hosepipe left in a front garden to have a drink, she meets the streetwise Pat (Teri Guzmán), who gives her a safety pin to keep her ripped top from falling open. Bonnie spots a gun in Pat's purse, "What do you carry a gun for?" she enquires, "To avoid the hassle of being raped – can you dig that?" Pat's clearly a no-nonsense person, and we've already seen that she's not an animal lover as she's threatening a dog with a stick when Bonnie first meets her (despite nicknaming her 'kitten'). So when Bonnie spots a small pooch in an open-top convertible she's more interested in the car than the cuteness. The car's owner, Dan, comes back after jogging (wearing just a pair of tight shorts and a dressing gown) and starts to smooth-talk the pair, while Pat hatches a plan to make some money. Under the pretence of 'going for a spin' to the beach, they get in Dan's car and make small talk. The camera is as lecherous as the man while the naïve Bonnie cuddles the man's dog, almost oblivious to her situation – although as we will see later on, she's not as sexually backwards as she appears. Pat pulls her gun and forces Dan onto a dirt track in the woods. He's clearly a man of means, and the strong and forceful Pat mocks him and his masculinity, relishing her power over him. "If it's money you want, I'll get it for you" he pleads, "I won't tell; do you know how people would laugh if I told them I was held up by two girls!" "Not if you're dead they won't" Pat spits back. She forces him to tell her where he lives, where his money is kept, and tells Bonnie to take the keys from his shorts. Pat leaves her with the gun to keep an eye on Dan while she goes to get the money. While she's away, another car comes to the out-of-the-way spot; a pair of lovebirds looking for somewhere to make out. Hearing the music from the car, Bonnie begins to dance, strip and seduce Dan. It's just the pretty blonde thinking on her feet, though, since she gets Dan so hypnotised that he doesn't shout for help.

Dan almost persuades Bonnie to let him go, but Pat returns. She's stolen what she can from the house and disposed of the dog after it bites her. It's arguably the most shocking moment of the film, as Pat takes the canine to the edge of a cliff, and throws the poor thing off. Pat is upset that Bonnie let their captive know that the gun is merely a water pistol, "You're not a kitten... You're a pussy!" The pair leave Dan tied up and head back to the car, warning him not to move or shout for thirty minutes. Of course, as soon as they're gone, he's screaming for help, but Pat has sent Bonnie back to check on him, and she's furious that he didn't heed the warning. Unfortunately for her, this is just a ruse so Pat can get away with all the money she stole. Feeling used, just as she has always done, she decides to take some power back from the situation. While Dan is still tied up, she forces herself on him, reversing the usual gender roles in this sort of situation in exploitation films. For the first time, she has control over Dan 'the lapdog'. When she's finished, she casually picks up her things, and walks away. Dan pleads, "You're not going to leave me like this?" Looking over her shoulder and speaking from experience she answers, "You'll manage".

Back in town, Bonnie attempts to steal an apple from a fruit stall, and when the vendor confronts her, another woman steps in, claiming to be a friend and the apple can go on her bill. Geraldine





(Joan Blackman) is a painter, and the pair hit it off, and she invites Bonnie back to her place. She's somewhat smitten with the youngster (in fact, we'd already seen that she'd noticed her earlier on when she walked past her with Pat) and offers her a bed in exchange for helping out and being a model for her. It doesn't seem to matter that it's *her* bed, Bonnie is just happy of the room and company.

Geraldine has a possessive streak, however; particularly when it comes to Bonnie having fun with men. She scolds her like a child when she finds her playing volleyball on the beach with a couple of guys. As a model, Bonnie is a hit, gaining plenty of attention at a gallery show; on the canvas as well as in person. One art collector, Vincent (Ed Bishop) makes Geraldine an offer she can't refuse for one nude, *"To hang above my bed"*. Bonnie is told, *"He's a very wealthy man, but a strange fish..."*

One evening, a burglar breaks in and disturbs the pair, and while Geraldine is strong and confronts the man, scaring him into submission, Bonnie shows sympathy for him; mainly because she's missing the touch of a man, and her hormones and physical needs get the better of her. Tricking Geraldine into thinking the would-be robber, Ron, has run away, she in fact smuggles him into her room. After they make love, Bonnie tells him that she wants to leave and run away with him. Unfortunately, Geraldine catches them and she becomes even more enraged at Bonnie, her jealousy overwhelming her, *"We'll have to burn the bedding..."* Not wanting to lose her possession, she shoots Ron dead. It has the reverse effect though, and Bonnie runs from the house, away from the emotional cage forged by the artist.

The only place she can think of going turns out to be the worst possible decision, as she seeks the protection of art collector Vincent. Not only does he have a collector's temperament when it comes to his artwork, it seems he does with other living things too. In his basement is a veritable menagerie of animals; all behind bars; all there for his amusement. Despite his charming... well, smarmy demeanour, he convinces Bonnie to hide out at his large mansion, which of course is a big mistake. Vincent is the epitome of the misogynistic attitude that we hope is long gone, but never will be completely. Not only does he wish to have Bonnie on his walls within the artwork, but he wants her physically too. Not just sexually (although he is a complete sleaze whose arrogance is as grating as his obnoxiousness) but his real intent is made clear when he buys her a bracelet, engraved with 'Vincent's Pet'.

Geraldine is still concerned about Bonnie's disappearance, and her obsession leads her to accept an invitation from Vincent to his house. He promises her a surprise, and boy, does she get one! Since discovering that the artist's sexual preferences mean he's barking up the wrong tree, his masculinity has clearly taken a knock. Perhaps he's got some fiendish plan to demean or 'see to' her; she does, after all, represent everything he can't stand. He even drops into the conversation that he has bought her paintings, *"When she couldn't find other buyers"*; in other words, out of pity. Greeted at the door by a barking pooch, she makes the

mistake of asking 'his' name; "All of my pets are she's.... I'm the only male in the house!" "She wants to be played with... All females want to be played with you know". We did say he was a complete sleaze ball, didn't we? Well, that's not even the half of it, as he attempts to sweet talk the artist, even trying to convince her she just hasn't found the 'right man', "You women, you have great expectations; but still never know what to expect". When she laughs in his face, saying she knows he is trying to seduce her, he smirks back, "My dear, I don't seduce women, I have them for my pets!" He then proceeds to tell her his dream, which is to have a zoo. Only his zoo will have only women. "They'd adore it, I assure you!" Naturally more than a little creeped out, Geraldine wants to leave, but Vincent teases her to stay by promising that she can see Bonnie. Her selfish infatuation seems strangely much stronger than her self-preservation. "She came to me; I tamed her..." The nasty little man tells her.

Reunited with Bonnie, Geraldine is concerned that she's changed. Particularly when she gets up and leaves without prompting when Vincent rings a bell, "We will see each other again". However, Vincent's true motive is soon revealed when he tells Geraldine that he wants to possess her too. She's understandably appalled, screaming that she's a woman not an animal. His response echoes the feeling of the idiotic misogynists of the time, "Women treat men like animals; taking over their jobs, trying to be superior; disguising themselves as lawyers, politicians, running factories – giving US orders!" He then gets to the crux of the problem. His mother had run the family business, and clearly 'wore the trousers', giving him the luxury which he takes for granted. Only the young Vincent saw this as an emasculation of his father. Then he was passed over for promotion as a curator at a museum for a female, "Whose only qualification was between her legs!" As he recounts the story, he is clearly getting more and more deranged. He then takes her down into his basement, "You want to be with Bonnie?" He shows her a whole host of cages, all containing various different animals, including a tiger. Over in the furthest cage is Bonnie. Of course, he's not satisfied with just having Bonnie, and he has his sights set on a ménage à trois. "Show me a man who's happy with one woman and I'll show you a liar." He almost gets his wish too, but for the plucky young Bonnie, who managed to escape, as Vincent is so conceited he believes he's fully 'trained' her. But tables turned, she leaves him and Geraldine locked in the cage, while releasing all the other poor animals, as they are truly two sides of the same coin.

Pets was based on an off-Broadway production by Richard Reich. Performed as three one-act plays, the original stories all took place with different protagonists. By keeping us focussed on Bonnie, the lead in the final story of the stage production, the film version gives us a much stronger emotional investment and as such, a much more powerful message of empowerment. It's a statement which is often overlooked by the people who couldn't see past the exploitation elements. Not only is the story about overcoming the trappings of the 'male dominated' world, but also the personal entrapments women were imposing on themselves. Still, there's plenty





more at work in the film. Almost as offensive as Vincent's views are the way he has of engaging the animals. Barely given enough space to move, it could even be read as a statement on the appalling conditions of some zoos as much as the ignorant views of their captor.

The tragedy of Bonnie's case is that she believes she wouldn't be missed by anyone, and as seen by the three encounters, she puts up with the most appalling treatment just to find a kind of acceptance, and 'love'. In the film's final moments, we see her free, having cast aside the bonds of Vincent's imprisonment. She stops (in a car stolen from her captor) to pick up a hitchhiker, who is thoroughly delighted. When asked where he was going, he gleefully responds, "Anywhere you are lady!" So with a wistful look in her eye, she drives off into the night, with a question mark following 'the end' caption possibly hinting that the worm may well have turned, just like women the world over were doing, or perhaps Bonnie has found a pet of her own.

Although not a household name by any stretch, Candice Rialson became a cult figure. *Pets* was her first starring role, although she'd soon become a staple in films such as *Candy Stripe Nurses* and *Summer School Teachers* (both 1974). She made a bigger impact in *Hollywood Boulevard* (1976), a Roger Corman production which was co-directed by Joe Dante and Allan Arkush (*Heartbeeps*, 1981). This was a mad-cap but highly satirical spoof on the low-budget film industry which is well worth seeking out. Her other famous role came with *Chatterbox* (1977), a notorious film which was an American remake of the infamous French film *La sexe qui parle* (1975), better known to those with an interest in those things as *Pussy Talk*. So no prizes for guessing what the chatterbox of the title refers to. Unfortunately, Candice decided to stop acting at the dawn of the eighties, but she remained an iconic figure of exploitation and cult cinema. So much so it's alleged that Quentin Tarantino (who has been known to pilfer homage many exploitation classics) modelled the Bridget Fonda character in *Jackie Brown* (1997) after Candice. She succumbed to liver disease in 2006, sadly.

Ed Bishop, who was already a well-known face on TV and movies, gloriously played the male villain of the piece, Vincent. His most recognisable role (particularly to English audiences) would of course be the blonde-topped Commander Ed Straker in Gerry Anderson's *UFO* series. Seeing him play such a sadistic and repulsive character here is quite a culture shock, but he manages to straddle the line between camp and ridiculous perfectly. Vincent never becomes a panto villain, despite the pompous bile he's spouting.

Although it's a brilliant film, *Pets* is incredibly hard to find legitimately. A DVD release by Code Red was taken from what they claimed was the only source they could find – a theatrical print – and as such is heartbreakingly battered and damaged. Some scenes have horrendous surface noise, and visible tears, lines and jumps. It's just a complete tragedy that the film will remain forever an undiscovered gem.

RAVING OVER RABID

by Dominic Culbert



Just released in high definition from ARROW VIDEO, *RABID* is ripe for re-discovery. We find out why you should check it out...

Building on a series of grungy shorts and two shorter-length films, *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*, Canadian director David Cronenberg released his debut controversial feature-length film in 1975. *Shivers* heralded a sea change in the horror genre, and tends to overshadow what came next. Released two years later, and sharing many of the same themes and fears as its predecessor, *Rabid* was, in many ways, Canada's answer to *Night of the Living Dead*. Nine years may have passed since George A. Romero unwittingly kick-started one of horror's most prevalent subgenres, but *Rabid* had much of the same nihilism and anarchy, if more action-orientated. Inspired by Romero's *The Crazies*, with a unique twist on the vampire narrative, *Rabid* is one of the more overlooked in the Cronenberg pantheon. Arrow Video has lovingly presented

Cronenberg's punky classic on a beautiful Blu-ray re-issue with plenty of special features, so now there's no excuse to let *Shivers* get all the credit.

Production began very quickly after *Shivers*, which proved to be a surprise hit for Cinépix, despite a thorough critical lampooning. The studio understandably asked whether the director had any more ideas stashed up his sleeves. Starting life under the title *Mosquito*, *Rabid* was developed with a little help from Cinépix boss, John Dunning. The film was made for 530,000 Canadian dollars (approx. £28,000) with almost half of the funding coming from 'surreptitious' donations from the Canadian government, who had little interest in supporting genre pictures at the time. The Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) became one of the primary funding sources for independent filmmakers by

the mid-seventies, and having subsidised *Shivers*, the CFDC swiftly came under attack for the film's explicit content, and were feeling understandably burned by the whole experience.

A more expansive effort than *Shivers*, *Rabid* follows Rose (played by prolific porn actor Marilyn Chambers, who sadly passed away in 2009) who, after a fatal motorcycle accident on a Quebec highway with her boyfriend Hart (Frank Moore), is rushed to the nearby plastic surgery resort for an emergency operation. She undergoes an experimental procedure under Dr Dan Keloid, which sees some of her healthy skin become morphogenetically neutral; think stem cell treatment and you're on the right track. The skin is then grafted onto the burnt parts of her body, in the hope that it'll replace the damaged skin and organs. Of course, with Cronenberg's fascination



with the flesh and suspicion of science and surgery, it all goes rather wrong. After Rose's body perfectly heals, she develops an opening in her armpit, hiding a phallic stinger which she uses to drink the blood of human (and one poor bovine) victims. Aside from leaving gaps in her victims' memories, they become rabid zombies who spread the disease with some saliva on blood action. While the zombies, in true tradition, lose all sense of self, Rose crucially retains her humanity and wanders around Montreal in a strange drunken otherness, before martial law is soon declared. Cronenberg knows his punchy endings - try getting to the end of *The Fly* without 'something in your eye' - but *Rabid* is perhaps the finest. A grim, godless statement that leaves a sour taste in the mouth and a stunned expression as Rose's corpse is thrown into the back of a rubbish truck.

Cronenberg had originally wanted starlet Sissy Spacek in the role of Rose, but the studio shot this decision down, bizarrely, because of her Texan accent and freckles. *Carrie* was released during *Rabid*'s production, with Spacek enchanting audiences in the titular role. The decision to cast Chambers was put forward by producer and music supervisor Ivan Reitman; the choice allegedly leading to Cronenberg's then landlady kicking him out of his apartment. *Rabid* is understandably a hard sell, and Reitman felt that having a

well-known porn star in tow would make the stark visuals easier to swallow in other territories. Infamous for her adult movies, Chambers was searching for a mainstream role, and while *Rabid* was hardly family fodder, she gives a great turn in the lead role. Cronenberg has stated that Chambers put a lot of hard work into the film, and it shows. Rose is sly, coy, and frightening but above all, deeply sympathetic. After all, she is both the film's antagonist and its source victim. Peeling back the necrotic layers, *Rabid* is a tragic love story, doomed from the start.

Sissy Spacek has a wonderful sensuality, but in typical Cronenbergian fashion, *Rabid* is a film steeped in sex and reproduction, and Chambers seems a perfect casting choice in retrospect. Of course, *Shivers* is a powerful erotic allegory with Lynn Lowry's powerful admission of her dream to physician Roger remaining a haunting scene. *Rabid* may not reach the same levels of philosophical and poetic contemplation, but it continued the filmmaker's preoccupation with blending sexuality with disease. It's an invasive horror, quickly mirrored with the devolution of society, and it also proved sickeningly prophetic with the AIDS crisis just around the corner.

Rabid may follow some of the same formula of the archetypal zombie flick, but it also has plenty in common with a

vampire movie. To say Cronenberg made a vampire film is only a half-truth; instead, it was more of an appropriation. Shot with the director's near cinéma vérité style, it made for engrossing scenes of panic on the streets of Montreal, and capturing the same sense of dread and scuzzy realism seen in Romero's early works. There are even zombies terrorising a shopping mall (sound familiar?). Where Romero's zombies may have had a charm about them, Cronenberg's are vile creatures, with a jaundiced pallor and pus-oozing eyes. But there's the tricky issue of whether they classify as zombies at all. They straddle a line between vampires and zombies, but though they haven't strictly died, they do enter into a brain-dead state. For our money, they're still zombies.

Whatever the case, Cronenberg took the zombie horror formula and went completely in his own direction, giving it more of a sociological slant than political. *Shivers* is the more pensive and satirical of the two, going after materialism and the increasing obsession with the self, but *Rabid* remains the most watchable and entertaining of Cronenberg's first few efforts, despite never compromising its ultra-bleak outlook.



Both *RABID* and *SHIVERS* are available now on Dual Format DVD/Blu-ray from ARROW VIDEO.





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by Andrew Pollard

Alexandre O. Philippe

You may have heard of *DOC OF THE DEAD*, the latest film from *THE PEOPLE VS. GEORGE LUCAS'* ALEXANDRE O. PHILIPPE. With the film now finally receiving a UK release, we grabbed some time with writer/director Philippe to discuss the rise of the zombie, the many different types of zombies out there, the work of greats like George A. Romero, the age-old slow zombies vs fast zombies debate, his upcoming documentary based on *Psycho*'s classic shower scene, and a whole lot more...



STARBURST: The first question really has to be - why did you choose zombies to be the focus of one of your projects?

Alexandre Philippe: Well, I've made a lot of pop culture documentaries - I'm very, very interested in pop culture! I was at San Diego Comic-Con in 2009. I pretty much go there every year, but in 2009 I remember realising that there were a lot more zombies there than there ought to be. So I made a mental note that I really had to investigate what was happening. Zombies have been a part of underground culture for decades now, a very strong, passionate underground culture, but they were never mainstream. It was obvious that they were really starting to get into the mainstream in a big way. So really, to me, *Doc of the Dead* was very specifically about investigating how did zombies become mainstream and why now.

Had you considered looking at any other subgenres of horror up to that point? Maybe slasher films, found footage horrors, *Universal Monsters*...

Zombies are always such a large topic. It's funny you should mention that, as my new film, the one I'm working on right now, is a documentary on the shower scene in *Psycho*. So I am now officially kind of into 'slasher mode,' if you will. But zombies is such a huge topic; even focussing on zombies, you can't possibly cover everything there is to know. I always try and find a fairly narrow focus. Even then, there was a lot of ground to cover.

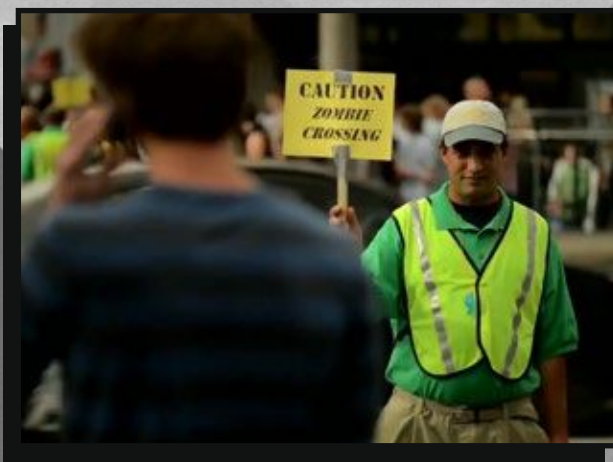
And when you started putting *Doc of the Dead* together, did you set out with any particular aim or was it purely investigating why zombies were now in the mainstream?

The goal of *Doc of the Dead*, for me, was to try to figure out how zombies got into the mainstream. That's really the premise of *Doc of the Dead*. Obviously that happened to be a crash course in zombie history, but the real focus of the film is zombies in culture.

So were you a fan of zombies beforehand or was a lot of this relatively new to you then?

No, no, I was always a fan of zombies. I actually was a big fan of horror movies when I was a kid. In fact, my two introductions to horror when I was

DOC OF THE DEAD



6 years old were *Night of the Living Dead* and *Scanners*. So I've always had a very close personal relationship to specifically *Night of the Living Dead*. That movie freaked me out when I was a kid; it gave me nightmares. So it was pretty special to get to meet and spend time with George Romero.

When making the documentary, how special was it to get to meet so many legends of the zombie subgenre?

Yeah, it was really wonderful. Quite honestly, they were all just about the nicest people you can imagine. Really wonderful people. The thing that I think is fair to say is a lot of people in horror are very, very sweet. They're very sweet people. And that remains very true of George and true of Simon Pegg and true of Bruce Campbell. Those guys are really great, and they were really generous with their time.

The documentary covers various angles, such as speaking to some of the creators of the subgenre, you have actors, fans, there's a scientific angle, you look at zombies in Voodoo. Were there any other angles you wish you could've looked into or any omissions that you had to make?

There's plenty of omissions. First of all, I was dealing with a studio who want you to make a certain film, that's one of the restrictions. The next thing is budget. And another restriction also is making an 80-minute film that has

to stay within certain parameters. I would've loved to have made a 5-hour zombie movie. The biggest omission, of course, is Lucio Fulci and the Italian zombie movement. But I had to make very hard decisions in order for the film to pay off in terms of premise, which is why zombies are so popular today. I had to identify the milestones in zombie culture that actually directly influenced where we are today. I'm not saying Lucio Fulci wasn't an influence, but Fulci was an extension of what was happening at the time in zombie culture. So yeah, there was a lot we couldn't include, and we'd have loved to include *Rec* and to start talking about the hybrid of zombies and possession films. We'd have loved to talk about the more indie films like *Fido* and *Pontypool*. At the end of the day, I had to make some hard choices. But that's the same with every film; you have to leave some of it unfortunately out.

At points in the documentary you take a look at scientific and Voodoo-based zombies. Coming out of *Doc of the Dead*, what did you feel you learnt from the film?

You hear a lot about the Haitian Voodoo zombie. What's really amazing to me is their views. Clearly it's a thing there. They won't tell you very specifically, "Here, let me take you to a zombie or someone we've zombified," because it's in the code, you can't legally turn people into zombies. But Max Beauvoir, who is essentially the Pope of the Voodoo

religion, talks about zombification as a spiritual thing. In so many words they're saying, "Yes, we zombify people." So it does exist. We're not talking about, of course, George Romero's zombies, who functionally die and come back to life, but we are still talking about a form of zombification. Perhaps it's closer to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, if you will. It's kind of terrifying, really. It's very strange to me. When I think about it, it still gives me the creeps.

You managed to talk to the likes of George Romero, Simon Pegg, Bruce Campbell, Greg Nicotero, etc. What has the feedback been from those in the industry?

It's been great! We premiered the film at South by Southwest in March of last year, and we've had an amazing festival run. Pretty much from March until December, travelling around the world, touring with the film, the responses have been really, really good overall. We did it with EPIX, who financed the film, and it was essentially shown as a companion piece for *World War Z*. We had a theatrical release in Canada as well, and now it's starting to get released in other territories; Germany, obviously the UK, Taiwan, Israel, Italy is coming up as well. So I'm really excited to start sharing the film now on a wider scale.

One of the things that stands out early on in the film is the music choices that you use, with them fitting the tone of the film perfectly. How much of a



concentrated effort did you put into that part of it?

That's a good question. When you make a documentary about zombies, you also have to do it with a certain dose of humour, obviously, because zombies, for the most part, aren't real, right? To me, the entertainment value has to be high. The real truth about making docs is that, on the one hand, I really want them to appeal to the zombie fans, the real hardcore zombie fans, so there has to be a lot of fan service. And on the other hand, I also want someone who doesn't really know the first thing about zombies to get enjoyment out of it. So that's special. Tonally speaking, I wanted to constantly be kind of on the fine line between documentary and mockumentary. There was a number of set pieces that we discussed with our two producers on this, Geekscape and RedLetterMedia, to produce some original segments for the film based on a lot of the elements that we explored. And I really pushed that to be a really crazy, outrageous thing. I think it adds a lot, not to mention most of the documentaries that I create are very participatorial, so I actively seek fan-made films and tributes and things of that nature. I definitely found a few gems for this one as well.

Whilst the documentary presents a whole host of things from the zombie subgenre and essentially puts them on a table for the viewer to make their own

conclusions, do you ever find yourself having to maybe hold back on putting too much of your own views across when making a film like this?

I really like, and I've always liked, the idea of presenting evidence and letting people make up their own minds. When I made *The People vs. George Lucas*, that's something that, obviously, I was very opinionated on in a lot of ways. But it was really important for me to show both sides, because it's a complicated issue. So you let people ultimately decide. Again though, this is different because it's not like there's a huge debate. Zombies are not real. Yes, there's definitely some sort of hardcore fan debates about whether you should be a purist or not be a purist, whether zombies should be fast or slow. And again, that's fun to explore but this is not a social debate kind of documentary where I'm trying to expose some big conspiracy of some kind. So no, I think it's important in these docs for me to show as many different sides of this story, specifically when it comes to the big question of *Doc of the Dead*, which is how did zombies become so mainstream. Nobody can tell you for sure, "*This is the reason.*" We can all speculate and we can all debate that. So I try to present a kaleidoscope of ideas, but I'm not going to say, "*This is why this is happening,*" because it's all speculation.

With zombies now being in the mainstream, they're seen in movies, TV shows, novels, and comic books, do you

think there's a particular format or medium that's best for telling zombie tales?

What's interesting about zombies, at least modern zombies, is that they didn't start in literature; they actually started in movies. That's actually unique for what is now a classic movie monster. So certainly movies are very well suited for zombies, and I would say they probably remain my favourite medium. Although I have to say that comics are very good, too. I'm not just talking about *The Walking Dead*, there's a series right now called *Apocalypse sur Carson City* (*Apocalypse of Carson City*), it's really fabulous. Obviously, Charlie Adlard and Robert Kirkman do a great job with *The Walking Dead*, which I personally prefer the comic to the TV series itself. I think that if there had to be one way to see zombies, it'd still be zombie movies.

And are you a fast zombie or a slow zombie kinda guy?

I'm an all-inclusive kinda guy. I believe that we're seeing now so many different zombies, so many different interpretations, which I see as a sign that the genre is alive and well, that it's really helping it and it's really thriving. I've never been or want to be a purist of any kind because I think the moment you start boxing yourself into certain sets of rules then you're not opening yourself up to other possibilities. Interesting enough, and I'm sorry to say it, but this is what happens with religion across the

world. There's a lot of people who will box themselves in and not hear other opinions. Wouldn't it be a better world if they would open themselves to these other ideas? You can believe what you believe – you can still prefer the Romero movies – but you can still respect that other people have opinions. I'm sorry for the simile there, but to me it strikes an important core; it's not just about zombies, it's about a way of life. We live in a very interesting world, and I think that to be open about different things... we're certainly lacking that in our society right now. All this to say, when the trailer to *World War Z* came out and we were seeing for the first time zombies behaving like ants, zombie purists and a lot of zombie fans freaked out. They were extremely vocal about this – “*How dare they?!!*” – but I was like, “*Let's give this a chance*”. I mean even if the movie had sucked – and it was actually a pretty decent film, not the best zombie movie but a pretty decent film – it would have still been cool to see different things tried. And I'm glad they did it because now it brings another element, another possibility to what zombies can be. As long as the genre does this then to me that's a sign that it's well and it thrives. So I'm glad to see new things, that's for sure. What fascinates me, too, is you look at the zombie purists. When we start telling them that it's okay that there's other kinds of zombies, they get offended. That's sort of narrow-minded. I don't know why fans feel offended about it. I can still prefer Romero zombies, but if you tell me that you like the *Dawn of the Dead* remake then I'm not going to get pissed off about it. Why should I? Nobody's taking the classic Romero movies away from us.

Coming out of *Doc of the Dead*, did you feel that there was anything you took from the experience and that production?

Any time you make a documentary you learn a tremendous amount. It's a journey, you're exploring a world and ideas – it's very enriching. And we got to meet the fans on *Doc of the Dead*. There's a lot of things, but I think I would say probably the one thing that took me by surprise a little bit was George Romero doesn't really understand why it happened, his creation, how did zombies become so immensely popular. That was really interesting to me. It's something really sort of beautiful and poetic about this; this man who was really just a passionate filmmaker who wanted to make a good little film and this thing just became so much more than he ever imagined. That was something I did not expect, but it was really cool.

In some of your previous films you've looked at George Lucas and at Paul the octopus, and you mentioned you're now planning on making a documentary centred on *Psycho*. Is there anything you can tell us about this new project?

The film is called *78/52* and it's actually going to be a black and white

documentary very specifically about the shower scene. Not *Psycho* in general, just the shower scene. So it has a very narrow focus. It's extraordinarily wide as a topic, there's just so much to it. That's a huge passion project for me. I've been a Hitchcock fan since I was about 12 years old, really studying his craft. Hopefully this will come out in 2016, possibly 2017. We're getting a lot of support and some amazing interviews so far; we've been in touch with the Hitchcock family and they've been very supportive so far. Look out for that!

What kind of angles are you looking to explore with *78/52* then?

The shower scene is, in a lot of ways, still to this day the most important scene in cinema. It changed everything. It changed our industry, it changed the way that we watched movies, but it also has a lot of secrets and a lot of nuances to it. There is going to be an element of the documentary which will keep almost obsessively going over the scene... and over the scene... and over the scene; then every single time it will reveal new things about it with different perspectives and elements. I've already had some pretty epic interviews, including a 3½ hour interview with Stephen Rebello who wrote the book *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* which became the movie *Hitchcock*. It's unreal what you discover with the scene when you start talking about it to people who really know their stuff. It's amazing how when you put people in front of the scene, they will show you something you've never seen before. It's an endless source of discovery because it's absolutely genius. It's also a portal to understanding the genius of Hitchcock, to understanding his craft, to understanding his creative process. So that's fundamentally what I'm really excited about. After watching *Psycho*, people could never take showers the same way again. Hopefully after watching *78/52*, you'll never watch the shower scene the same way again.

And once that's out of the way, are there any other passion projects that you'd love to do?

I also have a web comics company which I launched a year and a half ago. That's a huge passion project called Fried Comics, it's online and we're planning on going to print, too. We've got two books out right now, but that's a huge passion project for me. There's also some films I want to make, a lot of other documentaries. I really want to make a whole series now of documentaries of very minute aspects of cinema, like the shower scene. I want to continue to explore pop culture in a lot of ways. So yeah, I've got work to do.

Is there a set release schedule for the comic books?

There are two full books that are available right now. We're working on getting them to print in the near future.



Then a third series, we have the first issue out already and we're working on the second issue right now. Each of our stories are inter-connected, so they're part of a big shared universe. They're very irreverent comics, very pulpy, kind of like *South Park* with a dash of revisionist history. To give you an example, our flagship series is actually called *Pregnant Bitches of War*.

Having specialised in documentaries, do you see yourself continuing to make just them or do you see yourself wanting to make more standard narrative fictional films?

I think if I end up making narrative fiction, I'd still continue to make documentaries because there's a lot of stories that I still want to explore. I can't imagine just calling it a day to focus on fiction and not making any more documentaries. That's something very close to my heart. At the end of the day, it's managing time. It's difficult enough to make documentaries full-time, then when you have a comic book company on the side, that's another full-time job really. So there's a million projects that I'd like to do but I can't do them all and I can't do them all at the same time.

DOC OF THE DEAD is released in the UK on February 23rd, and you can find out more about Fried Comics, including the bizarre but brilliant PREGNANT BITCHES OF WAR at friedcomics.com.



DOC OF THE DEAD

**DVD REVIEW: DOC OF THE DEAD / CERT: 15 /
DIRECTOR: ALEXANDRE O. PHILIPPE / SCREENPLAY:
CHAD HERSCHBERGER / STARRING: GEORGE A.
ROMERO, MAX BROOKS, ROBERT KIRKMAN, SIMON
PEGG, BRUCE CAMPBELL, TOM SAVINI / RELEASED:
FEBRUARY 23RD**

Alexandre O. Philippe's latest documentary looks to discover just why zombies are now a popular piece of mainstream entertainment. To do so, Philippe looks at a whole host of different angles and brings in plenty of familiar faces to give their thoughts on the matter.

Going back to the very beginning, the film looks at initial efforts like *White Zombie* before switching attention to the godfather of the zombie subgenre, George A. Romero, and taking audiences on a joyous history lesson of the walking dead over the ensuing decades. Whilst there are plenty of famous genre names on show – Romero, Sid Haig, Tom Savini, Simon Pegg, Bruce Campbell, Max Brooks, Robert Kirkman, Charlie Adlard, Greg Nicotero, Stuart Gordon, and Brian Yuzna, to name just a few – *Doc of the Dead* has so much more. It also speaks to fans, explores the serious origins of zombie culture, addresses the notion of Voodoo zombies, looks at virus-infused zombies, explores the scientific concept of zombies in the animal kingdom, explores zombie subculture as a satirical tool, and even throws up the age-old debate of slow zombies vs. fast zombies. Whereas it's always informative, the film is also never afraid to poke fun at its subject matter, and even goes as far as introducing us to zombie porn (honestly, something we definitely didn't know existed before seeing *Doc of the Dead*. Honest...)

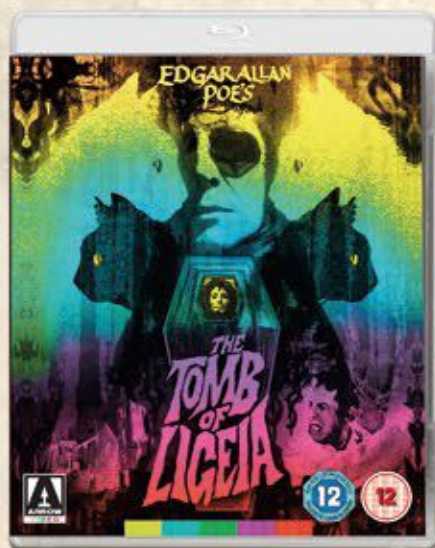
Philippe's film manages to cover a whole host of zombie-based angles, and comes across as a passion project for not just the director but for the very people who are included in the feature, be they fans, creators, actors, scientists, or even porn stars. Granted, there are a few notable omissions (most conspicuously the non-mention of Lucio Fulci), but *Doc of the Dead* serves up something for near-enough everybody. Whether you're a hardcore zombie fan or just a casual viewer with a fleeting interest in the shuffling hordes that are seemingly everywhere these days, *Doc of the Dead* will entertain and likely educate. Hell, there's even Bruce Campbell carrying out a legally-binding wedding service between two of the undead! And if that wasn't enough, additionally there's some real-life tips on how to survive should a zombie apocalypse finally happen.

Whether used as a veritable historical tool or viewed merely as a fun companion piece to an often-crammed corner of the horror genre, *Doc of the Dead* is an excellent look at what is so special to so many about the vast variety of zombies that have populated screens, books and video games over the years. It provides plenty of food for thought, and enough interesting viewpoints and tidbits to satiate even the most demanding of zombie appetites.

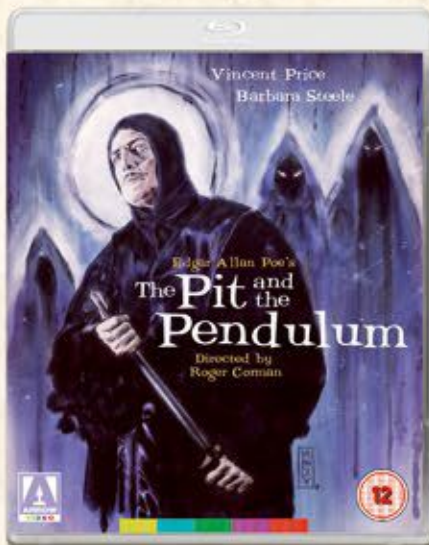




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Alternative Fairy Tales

by Dominic Cuthbert

With the impending release of yet another revamped fairy story, *CINDERELLA*, we open our own tome of fables to see how the stories - typically aimed at children - have been reimagined for the modern age...



Fairy tales are a global storytelling tradition, part cautionary tale and part wanderlust, which continue to fascinate artists and audiences alike. Today, we're inundated with fairy tales across a variety of media, from comic books to video games and everything in between. 2013 alone saw the theatrical release of *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*, *Jack the Giant Slayer* and *Oz the Great and Powerful*. With a Kenneth Branagh-helmed *Cinderella* set for a March release, here are a few alternative fairy tales to mull over; the majestic, the magical and the downright awful.

Perhaps the most commonly adapted fairy tale is Lewis Carroll's hallucinatory *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Captured

on stage, in games, and animation, and latched onto by arty teens, *Alice in Wonderland* could well be the definitive fairy tale. If you strip away all of its theological reveries and visual glamour, *The Matrix* perfectly mirrors Alice's own tumble in Wonderland. Morpheus himself describes the matrix as the 'rabbit hole' during his revealing first meeting with Neo. And like Alice, bored with everyday reality, Neo follows the white rabbit and soon discovers a strange heady world which makes little sense, where everything is simultaneously real and unreal. *The Matrix* leaves viewers questioning the nature of reality; the ultimate goal of Carroll's charming nonsense novel.

A far cry from the Wachowskis' hit,

Jan Švankmajer's 1988 feature debut *Něco z Alenky*, (or *Something From Alice*), is an artful and surrealist retelling of the classic story. Pairing up live action with stop motion, it's a grown up film posing as if for children, teeming with Svankmajer's dark flourishes - think a Czech David Lynch - and marked by its morbid and uncompromising set design. Alice, played by Kristýna Kohoutová, sees a taxidermically stuffed rabbit come to life and follows it into a desk drawer. The plot mirrors the original seamlessly, if a dark and feverish interpretation, while retaining Carroll's sense of ambiguity.

If Svankmajer's retelling is a brooding and artful response to the source material, Tim Burton's 2010 effort is surely one of

Něco z Alenky (1988)





THE COMPANY OF WOLVES

the worst. Starring Mia Wasikowska as a nineteen-year-old Alice returning to a radically different Wonderland, she soon learns it's up to her to end the bobble-headed Red Queen's reign. Even the crop of British acting talent wasn't enough to save this awkward outing. It may not have been a critical success, but its huge earnings prove the potency of Carroll's story, even now, and with Burton currently filming *Through the Looking Glass*, it isn't a story that's going to fall out of fashion anytime soon.

Creative types are keen to plumb the depths of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the character has become commonplace. As is the case with most beloved fairy stories, its exact origins are hard to pin down, though it was first published by the French writer Charles Perrault in the 1700s, putting his own spin on traditional folk tales. Jump ahead some 300 years, you get the publishing of the brilliant *Bloody Chamber* from writer and feminist Angela Carter. Inside this acclaimed 1979 collection was one story titled *The Company of Wolves*, a reworking of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Cranking up the sexual connotations, Carter's story was a breath of fresh air into a very stale story. The short is made up of mini tales which captivated filmmaker Neil Jordan, leading to his Gothic 1984 film of the same name. Carter co-wrote the screenplay alongside Jordan, which mirrored the short with all its smoky settings and loaded imagery.

The Company of Wolves may have upped the sexual imagery and undertones, but David Slade's *Hard Candy* was the logical conclusion. Ellen Page is dressed to kill in her striking red hoodie, as fourteen-year-old Hayley Stark, who, after weeks of online messages, meets up with thirty-

two-year-old photographer Jeff Kohlver (Patrick Wilson). Subverting the source material, Hayley is the one hunting Jeff. Given the nuanced sexual undercurrent of *Little Red Riding Hood*, it's a stroke of genius to pitch 'the big bad wolf' as a paedophile. It's uncomfortable viewing, and rightly so, unflinching in its nihilistic and systematic humiliation and torture of Jeff, trapped in Hayley's game of wolf and mouse. It may not have been originally intended as an allegory for *Red Riding Hood*, but given Page's hoodie and the subsequent marketing, the two are natural bedfellows.

Snow White may well have marked Walt Disney Productions' first animated feature, but it's also one of the Brothers Grimm's best loved fairy tales. Originally published in 1812, it's become one of the most endearing fairy stories, and perhaps the most recognisable with its seven dwarves routinely parodied in pop culture. Like *The Company of Wolves*, *Snow White* was given the Gothic overhaul with 1997's TV movie *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*. With more in common with the darker source material than the optimism of the Disney adaptation, the film stars Monica Keena as Lily Hoffman opposite Sigourney Weaver in an Emmy-winning role as her wicked stepmother Claudia. Possessing all the familiarities of the original story, albeit radically different from many of its counterparts, the film is one of few which relishes in the inherent darkness of the Grimms' vision. For a truly adult take on the story, the music video for Rammstein's *Sonne* is well worth checking out.

One of three *Snow White* films released in 2012 (the others being *Mirror Mirror* and the dreadful *Snow White and the Huntsman*), Pablo Berger's *Blancanieves* (*Snow White*) is seven dwarves ahead. Set in Spain in



ALICE IN WONDERLAND (2010)



HARD CANDY



SNOW WHITE: A TALE OF TERROR



SONNE



BLANCANIEVES



SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN



MALEFICENT



WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE



EDWARD SCISSORHANDS



SLEEPING BEAUTY (2011)

the '20s, seven bullfighting dwarves save Carmen de Triana (Inma Cuesta). Suffering from amnesia, she's unaware that she is the daughter of the famous matador Antonio Villalta who, on the day his wife died in childbirth, suffered a debilitating injury. Of course, he marries a wicked woman who treats Carmen like a slave and her father poorly. It's certainly a refreshing take on the source material, proving there's still new ways to tell the same story; just add wit, ability and bring to the boil.

One of the richest fairy tales to subvert and explore is *Sleeping Beauty*, as is the case with Anne Rice's (writing under the pseudonym A. N. Roquelaure) series of erotic novels *The Sleeping Beauty Trilogy*. Written and directed by Julia Leigh, *Sleeping Beauty* (2011) continues in the erotic vein, and is focussed around university student Lucy (Emily Browning) who, alongside several jobs and volunteer positions, responds to an ad where she sleeps in a bed alongside paying customers. The film is definitely divisive, among critics and viewers alike, but it's a cunning and nuanced retelling of a classic fairy story, updated and rethought for a modern intellectual audience.

Among the saturation of modern fairy tale adaptations, one flew ahead of the rest. Toning down the sexual connotations to just kisses and the implied roll in the hay, 2014's *Maleficent* was a welcome surprise. No matter what you thought of the film, it was a worthy effort and more engrossing than fairy stories in 2013 had to offer. Marking the debut feature from visual effects wizard Robert Stromberg, and looking like something cooked up by Peter Jackson, *Maleficent* takes the focus away from Princess Aurora somewhat, and focusses on the melodramatic tale of the tragic fairy herself. Played with gusto by Angelina Jolie, the film was a fun companion piece to the frankly boring source material, proving that there's still some interesting ways to force new life into worn out stories.

Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* is the

seventh in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and, after several underwhelming sequels, director Wes Craven returned to the fold to give Freddie fans something more interesting for their money, as well as laying the groundwork for his piece de resistance, *Scream*. Set outside of the movie continuity, in a world where Freddy Krueger is an iconic screen villain, the film sees Freddy haunting the real world and those involved with the *Elm Street* movies. Like with *Hard Candy*, it blends a traditional fairy tale with very real concerns. In this case, it's the child killer with the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. The film ends with main characters Dylan (Miko Hughes) and Heather (Langenkamp, playing herself) locking Freddy in a furnace like the witch in the gingerbread house.

The idea of the 'beauty and the beast' is a potent trope, especially in the horror genre (crikey, just look at *The Fly*!) but the fairy tale dates back to 1756, penned by French writer Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. With a story with connotations of bestiality, it's of little surprise that Angela Carter explored the idea with her story *The Tiger's Bride*. Years before boring cinema goes, Tim Burton was the poster boy for quirky, stylised and grimly humorous movies, and his 1990 hit *Edward Scissorhands* owes a tremendous debt to de Beaumont's traditional story. It's the tale of a robot boy, played by Johnny Depp in the first of many collaborations, whose inventor dies before giving him hands. Brought home by an Avon lady (Dianne Wiest), Edward soon falls in love with her daughter Kim (Winona Ryder). As much a satire of suburbia as it is a fairy tale, *Edward Scissorhands* has become one of the director's best loved films and was for many the definitive modern fairy tale. Until *Pan's Labyrinth* came along, that is.

Guillermo del Toro balances his time between deeply personal Spanish language films and stylish blockbusters, and the two met in the middle with 2006's *Pan's Labyrinth*: the spiritual and thematic successor to *The Devil's Backbone*, five

years earlier. Both films are set in the Spanish Civil War and centre on children and the supernatural. *The Devil's Backbone* may have more in common with the traditional ghost story, but *Pan's Labyrinth* has all the magic and majesty of the fairy tale. Inspiration from *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Great God Pan*, as well as a generous dose of del Toro's abundant imagination, culminates in the story of Ofelia. Having moved to a military camp with her pregnant mother under the order of her fascist stepfather, Ofelia follows a fairy to a faun who reveals she is a princess, but must prove herself with three demanding tasks. The stuff of fairy tales indeed. As well as an exploration of the Spanish Civil War, *Pan's Labyrinth* had a clear narrative lineage but is a reinvention of the form for the modern audience and has won fans in their droves.

Cemented as one of cinema's most endearing cult classics, Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986) combined puppetry and studio magic for one of the finest modern fairy tales. Drawing stimulus from *The Wizard of Oz*, imagery from the Grimms' fairy tales and the children's writer Maurice Sendak, *Labyrinth* follows the story of fifteen-year-old Sarah (Jennifer Connolly) who accidentally wishes away her baby brother Toby to the Goblin King Jareth (David Bowie). He'll keep Toby if she's unable to complete his labyrinth in thirteen hours. With all the trappings of the fairy tale in tow, the film continues to keep the form alive and, what's more, prove its lasting allure.

First published in 2002, Bill Willingham's acclaimed comic series *Fables* is a melting pot of all great fairy tales from *Red Riding Hood* to *Snow White* and almost everything in between. Of course, the idea of one shared universe for all fairy tales is nothing new, or specific to

comic books. Loosely based on the 1990 children's story of the same name, *Shrek* is a fairy tale parody, as charming as it is funny. Subverting the traditional formula whereby a prince saves a princess, *Shrek* revitalised the fairy tale years before the box office was clogged up with retelling after retelling.

TV too has its fair portion of shared universes. *Grimm* is a fairy story by way of a police procedural, which sees a detective learn he is the descendent of a line of guardians known as Grimms, whose duty it is to maintain the balance between humanity and the mythological creatures of Wesen. Many of the episodes are based on the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, albeit with a lot of creative license, while taking in other fables and fairy stories. As the show is well into its fourth series, the source material is only going to last so long. But given the appeal of the show, and its continued success, more are surely set to follow. *Once Upon a Time* also mixes up fairy tales, although this time, they have no memory of their former selves, and live in Storybrooke, Maine. It follows the exploits of Emma Swan (Jennifer Morrison) who discovers she's the child of Snow White and Prince Charming, and she must destroy the Evil Queen lauding over the fairy tale folk trapped in the real world by her nefarious curse.

Given the success of *Fables*, *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time*, among many others, it seems the modern approach to fairy tales is mixing things up, combining the old to make something new for modern audiences. In whatever case, these classic stories retain their popularity and will enthrall and excite audiences for decades to come.

Kenneth Branagh's *CINDERELLA* will be released in the UK on March 27th.



LABYRINTH



THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE



GRIMM



ONCE UPON A TIME

PAN'S LABYRINTH



TIME TRAVEL MOVIES:

by JR Southall



As we prepare to take a second trip in the HOT TUB TIME MACHINE, STARBURST casts its gaze toward those films that break the chronological barriers...

Past, Present and Future Tense

From Bill and Ted to *The Butterfly Effect*, we've had a long fascination with time travel at the cinema and this interest has manifested itself in a variety of different ways. However, whether it's adventuring in the past or journeying to a distant future, closer inspection will reveal that there are really only two distinct plots shared between all of these films; the time tourist, and the predestination paradox.

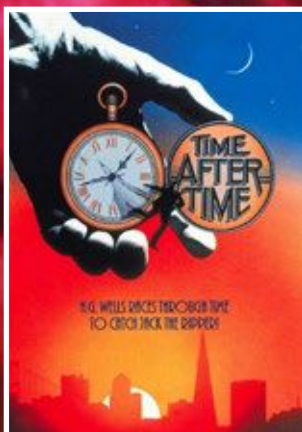
Robert Zemeckis' 1985 adventure *Back to the Future* is perhaps the most successful time travel movie ever made; drawing upon George Lucas and Steven Spielberg's then-recent successes for thematic inspiration, and harkening back tonally to the sci-fi romp's 1950s heyday, what *Back to the Future* did so well was to make a complicated idea seem like something relatively simple. The broadness of its appeal was built upon its ability to feel like a time tourist tale – essentially a fish out of temporal water – while simultaneously introducing the notion of the predestination paradox, creating an extra level of jeopardy as Marty McFly must not only find his way back to his own time, but also avoid changing his parents' timelines (and thus

circumnavigating the circumstances of his own conception) as he does so. Two sequels, filmed back-to-back and released in 1989 and 1990, elaborated on the premise of the original by taking the character first forwards and then even further backwards in time, escalating the paradox jeopardy, while simultaneously increasing the entertainment, allowing for not just an amusing prediction of America's future but also an opportunity for McFly to spend time in another of the most fondly remembered eras of its past. In so doing, Zemeckis upped the ante on how much fun he could squeeze out of the franchise, but he also risked losing his audience by confusing them away from the films; fortunately for him, Zemeckis was intelligent enough to simplify the premise to the point at which it was comprehensible to an audience looking for kicks at the flicks rather than a lecture on theoretical temporal physics. While the sequels weren't as successful as the original, they nevertheless managed to rack up global revenues not far short of \$600m.

Just as Spielberg's *Jaws* had taken root in the monster movies of a bygone era and updated them for the 1970s, and *Raiders*

of the *Lost Ark* had refreshed the chapter serial for the post-*Star Wars* generation, *Back to the Future* too had its ancestry in an earlier period of popular cinema.

George Pal's original 1960 adaptation of H.G. Wells' seminal novel *The Time Machine* had appeared as the 1950s cycle of post-nuclear armageddon cinema was winding down, and science fiction filmmakers were casting more widely in search of inspiration. As part of the movement that had given rise to the originals of *The Thing from Another World* and *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, *The Time Machine* would inevitably emphasise the Eloi versus Morlocks portion of Wells' novel, rather than focussing on its socio-political analogies; nevertheless in many ways, it pre-empted the later counterculture revolution of the '60s with its focus on 'hippie' ideals. Essentially a time tourist story rather than anything more intellectually rigorous, the 2002 remake basically follows suit and is notable only for pop starlet Samantha Mumba's rather unusual costume and the eccentricity of Jeremy Irons' performance as the Über-Morlock.



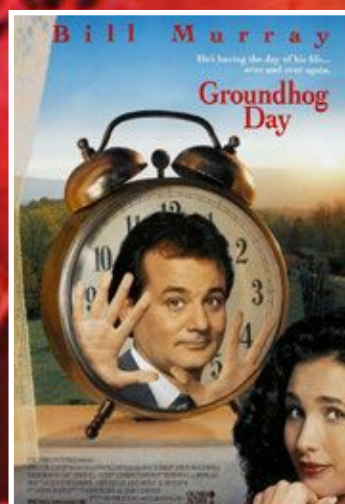
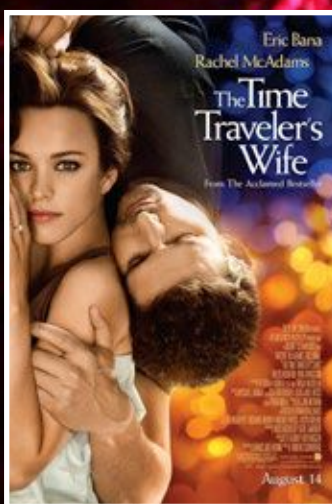
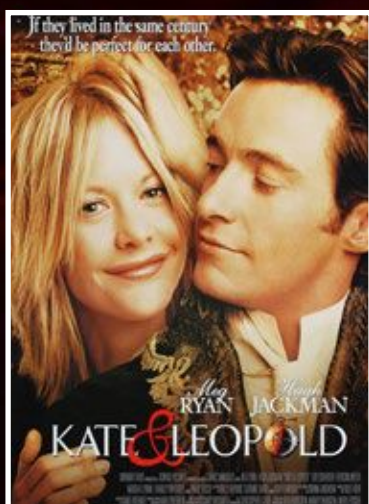
However, Wells' novel was also the starting point for Nicholas Meyer's under-rated 1979 film *Time After Time*, in which Wells himself journeys to the future (a contemporary San Francisco) in pursuit of an errant Jack the Ripper. Eschewing once again the time paradox possibilities inherent in the premise, in favour of a comparatively uncomplicated cat-and-mouse thriller with 'stranger abroad' overtones, *Time After Time* is nevertheless an absolute gem of a movie, in many ways the converse of *Back to the Future*, but equally as successful in achieving its aims.

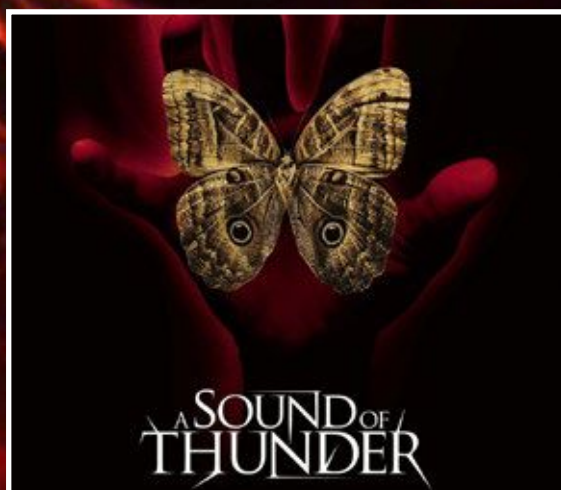
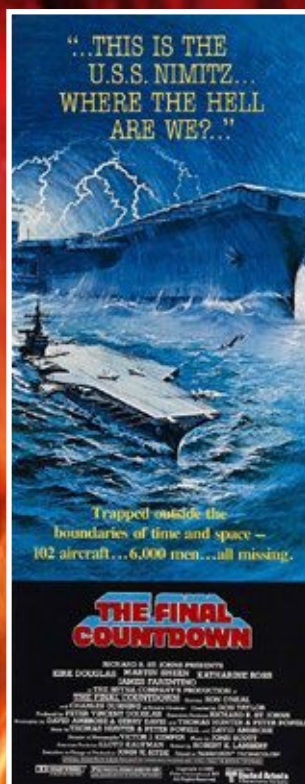
Playing the villain in *Time After Time* was David Warner, who would return in a similarly sinister role two years later in *Time Bandits*. Muddling myth and legend with real history, *Time Bandits* was a production from the Monty Python team, and was basically a series of interlinked sketches featuring encounters with characters as varied as Napoleon Bonaparte and Robin Hood (John Cleese playing the part as a riff on Prince Charles, with Ian Holm as a gloriously insecure Napoleon), before eventually wrapping up the underlying storyline in a grimly fairytale-esque finale. It's a children's film appealing equally to adults, with the time travel element used mostly as a means to an end, allowing for the large cast to have as much fun in as wide a variety of situations as possible. It was, however, one of a number of films appearing in the early 1980s that had ultimately led to the creation of the blockbusting *Back to the Future* time travel trilogy, as a wave of movies in a variety of genres all addressed some of the fundamental themes of the premise.

One such film was *Somewhere in Time*, released in 1980, and featuring then-Superman Christopher Reeve in a time-crossed love affair with a young Jane Seymour. The 'science' of *Somewhere in Time* takes very much backstage to the relationship between the two central

characters, in spite of having been adapted by genre specialist Richard Matheson from his own story. Two decades later, Hugh Jackman and Meg Ryan would reverse roles (as well as the direction of the time travelling) in *Kate & Leopold*, a film with broadly similar romantic ambitions and which would reduce the mechanics of the actual time-travelling still further. Perhaps more successful, certainly in terms of its box office, was the 2009 adaptation of Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, the source novel being essentially a runaway art-house hit of the noughties, broadly a 'thinking person's' equivalent of the later *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While it might have eventually brought in the global revenues, Niffenegger's narrative had pretensions towards intellectual rigour that undermined both the flow of the story and its characters, and its logically deficient contrivances coupled with a lack of real reasoning behind its plot meant that it was for the most part badly received.

A much more successful love story with tangential time travelling appeal was *Groundhog Day*, the Bill Murray vehicle in which his character experiences the same day over and over again, and uses the conceit to pursue the interest of Andie MacDowell. The technicalities of how Murray's life takes this unexpected turn are never addressed, but *Groundhog Day* does take a complicated concept and present it to the viewer in a consummately enjoyable fashion. Equally convoluted and basically telling the same story is *12:01*, also released in 1993, and which, in spite of being every bit as charming as the Bill Murray film, manages to attack the material from a far more science-orientated viewpoint. In *12:01*, Jonathan Silverman gets caught in a 24-hour time loop, and much like Murray, uses the reoccurring events of the day in question to enamour himself of the love interest, Helen Slater (coincidentally, the title character in *Somewhere in Time* director Jeannot Szwarc's *Supergirl*) while,





crucially, getting to the bottom of the illicit scientific experiment that has caused the loop to form.

Other films released in the early 1980s with time travel themes included *The Final Countdown*, a 1980 movie in which a modern day aircraft carrier is 'magically' transported back to the attack on Pearl Harbor, leading to the crew examining their consciences about interfering in established history and preventing the Japanese success. When ultimately they decide to become involved, the time storm that conveyed them back into history reappears and prevents the timelines from becoming corrupted. What might have been an interesting thesis on temporal cause-and-effect is ultimately fudged. 1984's *The Philadelphia Experiment* takes an urban myth coincidentally concerning another warship and extrapolates from it a cautionary tale about military experimentation. In many ways, *The Final Countdown* and *The Philadelphia Experiment*, while coming at the genre from different angles, are basically telling a similar story.

Peter Hyams is a filmmaker with a couple of early successes to his name, who has subsequently become better known for missing any number of parties, and who has twice made forays into the time travel movie, each arriving several years after their 'best before' date has expired. The first is a fairly typically 1990s beefcake actioner, albeit with illusions of intelligence, this one starring Jean-Claude Van Damme as the eponymous *Timecop*. It harkened back to the tech-thrillers that became prevalent in the mid-to-late-1980s in the wake of *Blade Runner*, and actually did considerably better box office than that description would suggest. Hyams' second time travel movie, *A Sound of Thunder*, extrapolated from the Ray Bradbury short story a plot in which the present day begins to unwind as the result of an ill-fated journey back into the Cretaceous era. Undoubtedly inspired by

Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Jurassic Park* adaptation, *A Sound of Thunder* eventually made it into cinemas in 2005 after a long and difficult pre-production, in which its budget was slashed by more than half. Thanks largely to underwhelming visuals and a confusing plot, the film's takings made its vastly shrunken budget look considerably more than generous, although it does have a definite cheap 'n' cheesy appeal.

The *Planet of the Apes* film cycle, beginning in 1968, explores a similar conceit, in which the actions of the present essentially cause ruptures in the future, and although the first chapter in the highly successful series doesn't advertise itself as a time travel movie, the unforgettable final scene – in which Charlton Heston realises just exactly where he has arrived – is the kind of intelligent twist that causes an audience to rethink the previous two hours of entertainment and realise they're watching a different kind of film altogether than the one they'd been expecting. It's an audacious, visually stunning and wholly memorable conclusion to the movie; one of cinema's more startling moments.

The granddaddy of time travel in the movies is, of course, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, first made as a silent back in 1921, before its first sound adaptation appeared a decade later, the best-known version arriving in 1949. The satire – in which an engineer from contemporary Connecticut is magicked into the time of King Arthur and uses his skills in order to become a magician rivaling Merlin – was based on the novel by Mark Twain which preceded the publication of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* by around seven years, and is indeed so popular that Disney have since filmed it twice more; firstly in 1979 as *A Spaceman and King Arthur* (aka *Unidentified Flying Oddball*), and latterly as *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* in 1995. Even the third *Evil Dead*



instalment, 1992's *Army of Darkness*, is essentially a variation on the theme, while the following year the French comedy *Les Visiteurs* (the English-language version, *Just Visiting*, inevitably appeared eight years later) brought the medieval grotesque into the modern day rather than the other way around.

A *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is yet another example of time tourism, albeit with soupcon of temporal paradox bubbling away under the surface. It's these simpler versions of the time travel movie that have generally been the most proliferous and concomitantly populist over the years. Basically taking the fish out of water plot conceit and transposing it into an historical or futuristic context, the time tourist plot allows for a blending of two or more popular genres and, when done well, is a recipe for success.

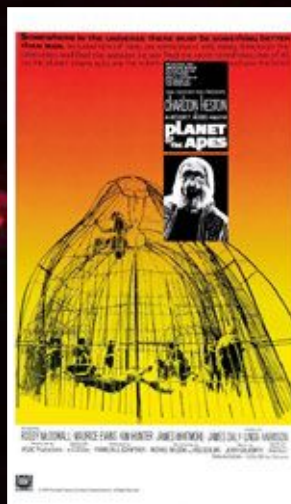
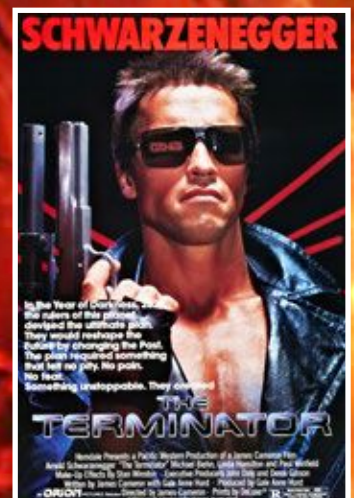
Far riskier is the other end of the time travel movie genre, the predestination paradox, in which a circular plot device incorporates the cause and the effect generally being both one and the same thing, and which demands much more alertness in its audience. Films using this conceit tend to be fewer and further between, but thanks to *Back to the Future* elucidating the core concept for an audience educated in its nature by *The Terminator* the previous year, the time paradox is now something that modern filmmakers, largely making a more sophisticated product anyway, are much more comfortable in tackling.

Blade Runner's original cinema release in 1982 was something of a disaster, with the film's themes as bleak as its visuals and broader audiences staying away in droves. However, as is often the case with movies as ahead of their time as Ridley Scott's film undoubtedly was, other science fiction-minded filmmakers picked up on its tech-noir approach to a genre that had become little more than Cowboys

and Indians in Space and ran away with it. With a soundtrack and camerawork as muscular as its star, James Cameron's *The Terminator* could have got away with being as standard a sci-fi thriller as *Outland* (another redundant but enjoyable Peter Hyams film) or *Saturn 3*. Instead, Cameron mapped the idea of predestination onto his film about a robot executioner dispatched from the future, with the resolution involving the freedom fighter who follows becoming involved in current events to the extent that he inadvertently becomes the reason the robot was sent back to 1984 in the first place.

The boldness and novelty of Cameron's idea (actually a standard of science fiction literature) was a match for his confident and distinct visual approach, and it is little surprise that three sequels and a TV series ensued, with another due to arrive later this year. Yet while the Bill and Ted semi-parodies (1989's *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* and its sequel of 1992, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*) played with the concepts of the time paradox in a light and surprisingly intelligent way, it wasn't until 1995 that the next unflinchingly bleak predestination-themed movie arrived.

12 Monkeys features lots of visual clues familiar from other Terry Gilliam movies like *Brazil* and *The Fisher King*, and given his struggles to attain the green light for several other movie projects, it was an odd choice for Universal Studios to approve. That it was ultimately a box office success is thanks to the star appeal of Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt (in a smaller, and yet idiosyncratically much 'bigger' part). The plot is about as dense as anything Hollywood has ever attempted, making films like *The Matrix* look like *Paddington Bear* by comparison, and with an ending as bleak and apparently ambiguous as even the most downbeat of art-house films, it's a wonder *12 Monkeys* was ever made at all. Inspired by the 1962 French short





La Jetée by Chris Marker, *12 Monkeys* is as striking and audacious a movie as anything on this list.

The late 1990s saw something of a revolution in American filmmaking, with the arrival on the scene of directors such as David Fincher, Steven Soderbergh and Paul Thomas Anderson refining new techniques into the popular consciousness. As a result, there has been a far greater acceptance of the divergent in mainstream cinema, and smaller films with bigger ambitions have found a much more accommodating route to fashionability. *Donnie Darko*, Richard Kelly's distinctly odd 2001 psycho-drama, became an overnight cult success thanks in large part both to its nostalgia-fuelled milieu, and to its ambiguous plot featuring temporally-inspired premonitions of disaster (in many ways, it's similar to the following year's *The Mothman Prophecies* – adapted from John Keel's 1975 book – in this respect). Sadly, *Donnie Darko*'s reputation was irreparably damaged when Kelly decided to release a 'Director's Cut' edition on DVD, removing the film's key ambiguities.

Shane Carruth was not to make the mistake of underestimating his audience with his 2004 film *Primer*, made on an extremely low budget of only \$7,000 and later to win the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Telling the story of four moonlighting engineers who accidentally discover a means to travel in time, *Primer* is dialogue and character-heavy, and makes few concessions to audiences beyond those who would already be predisposed towards finding the film – and is all the better for it.

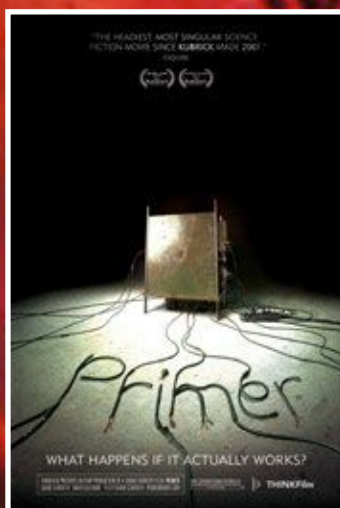
Two modern movies of a rather more mainstream bent have been 2011's *Source Code* and the following year's *Looper*. In *Source Code*, *Donnie Darko* star Jake Gyllenhaal is a U.S. Army pilot who escapes death by becoming involved in a number of different alternative realities, something akin to *Jacob's Ladder* by way of *Inception*; while *Looper* stars Bruce Willis in a story that is

basically a time-travelling variation on *Mr & Mrs Smith*, in which the assassin and his victim are a young-old combination of one and the same person. Which brings us to *Hot Tub Time Machine*.

John Cusack has largely made a career out of playing slightly feckless characters in what are basically a modern variation on classic screwball comedies, most famously the conflicted assassin in *Grosse Pointe Blank* and the arrested development record store owner in *High Fidelity*. Directed by Cusack's co-writer of each of those films, Steve Pink, *Hot Tub Time Machine* is another tale of an underachiever caught up in a situation seemingly beyond his control, when he and three loser friends are involved in an accident involving a hot tub and a can of energy drink and are transported back in time a quarter of a century. A comedy exercise in slacker wish-fulfilment and a time tourist movie, *Hot Tub Time Machine* saves all its creativity for the situations its characters find themselves in, and the mechanics of the journey itself are treated as a joke. Nevertheless, the film is as likeably laddish as Cusack and Pink's previous efforts, and was successful enough to spawn a sequel in which the team travel forwards ten years rather than once again back into the past.

Like the *Back to the Future* sequels, *Hot Tub Time Machine 2* looks set to spice up its original success by adding a little more predestination paradox into a recipe that will easily be strong enough to withstand the addition, given its familiarly old-fashioned approach to potentially perplexing material. Time travel movies have come a long way since that Connecticut Yankee landed up in King Arthur's Court, and simply enjoying the scenery these days is proving less attractive an option.

HOT TUB TIME MACHINE 2 opens in UK cinemas on April 10th.





TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

MARK STAY is the scriptwriter behind *EDDIE'S DEAD* and *KILL AND KILL AND KILL AGAIN*, and the co-creator of the new movie *ROBOT OVERLORDS*, for which he also wrote the novelisation. *STARBURST* caught up with him to find out more...



STARBURST: What can you tell us about *Robot Overlords*?

Mark Stay: The film is set in a world where we have been invaded by giant robots. They're all over the world and they've come from another planet. We don't know why they're here, and everyone is confined to their homes. If you do cross the line, you get one warning, and then it's game over. But there's one boy, called Sean Flynn, whose father was an RAF pilot who fought in the war against the robots and Sean is convinced that his father is still alive. With his friends, they figure out a way to break the curfew and go on a quest to find his father.

Where did the idea for the feature come from?

It's a movie that I've co-written with the director Jon Wright who did the excellent *Grabbers*, which came out a couple of years ago. He emailed me one morning with a two-page outline for a science fiction film set in the UK. He had a

nightmare where he was trapped inside, with giant robots outside and he knew that if he stepped outside, that would be it. ZAP! He said, "Are you interested?" and I said, "Yes please". We started bouncing ideas back and forth.

That's a very bleak premise. What's the challenge when writing something like that for young adults?

The very early drafts were very grim and very dark! In fact, in early drafts there was a very high body count. It was only when we started getting feedback that we realised we were making a kids' film. Movies like *District 9* served as our inspiration; it has a very indie vibe but has plenty of CGI and special effects. Jon, having come out of *Grabbers*, had a lot of experience with VFX. There was a point where we could have turned left down the road and it could have been a very grim, 15-rated kind of bloody, gory movie. But there was something about the premise, and the idea of a child standing



next to a giant robot that we thought would make a better movie. It's harsh and it does have edges. During the test screenings, we've discovered that kids from 11 to 14 absolutely dig it and I think, particularly with British kids who are too young to have seen *Harry Potter*, that they look at the big screen and see kids their age having a big widescreen adventure with big robots. Kids like something gritty. The young cast we've got are just incredible.

Did you have anyone in mind for the cast when you wrote it?

We actually got the people we wanted. When I heard we got both Gillian Anderson and Ben Kingsley I couldn't believe it. Roy Hudd is also in it, and he's really, really good!

You've written both the script and novelisation. What are the differences in producing the two?

From the start, we talked about creating a novelisation as well, and there's also an





Are we likely to see a sequel?

With the books, a sequel has already been commissioned, and we're working on outlines for a sequel to the film. We're looking at a sort of *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* type sequel book. Fingers crossed. The feedback we've gotten so far has been really positive.

What influences have you drawn from?

Jon and I are big fans of eighties movies: *Star Wars*, *The Goonies*, *Stand By Me*, but it's also a very British film as well. We also wanted it to be about a father and a son, and one of the books we looked at was Roald Dahl's *Danny, the Champion of The World*. That's why Sean's father is called Danny. When working on a relatively low budget we can't compete when it comes to VFX but we can compete when it comes to making sure the characters have heart!

Do you have any other projects planned?

I've got a really good horror comedy script in the hands of the director Jackie Wright at the moment. Very dark, very funny, and on the low budget end of the spectrum. A Bond would be nice. As would a *Star Wars* movie. But I think *Robots* is going to take up an awful lot of my time.

Words: Ed Fortune

ROBOT OVERLORDS is released in the UK on March 27th, and reviewed on page 85. The novelisation is out now.

iOS game available, as well as talk of comic books and all sorts of stuff. The novel from the very beginning was something I really wanted to write. It came from an exercise Jon had me do when we started on the film. We had four child actors and he asked me to write the backstory for each of their characters. What they were like before the war, what their lives were like, and how it had all changed. Before I knew it, I had written about ten thousand words and I realised that this was the beginning of the book.

What a book does that a film can't do is that it gets you into the mind of those

characters, particularly when you have a great villain! Ben Kingsley plays him in the movie, and part of the fun of the book is getting into his mind and seeing how it works. Various scenes and lines had to be cut from the movie, but there are all sorts of new scenes as well. The book opens just after the invasion, so we see a younger Sean Flynn at the beginning; we really open it up in the book. If there's something in the movie that leaves you asking questions, it'll be in the book. I grew up with some of the great movie tie-ins for *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* in the eighties and they all go into characters' backstories, so I've done that.



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REVIEWS

THE LATEST BIG
SCREEN GENRE
RELEASES REVIEWED
AND RATED



JUPITER ASCENDING

CERT: 12A / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: ANDY WACHOWSKI, LANA WACHOWSKI / STARRING: CHANNING TATUM, MILA KUNIS, EDDIE REDMAYNE, SEAN BEAN / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Moving from the busy July blockbuster release window to the cold territory of the following February usually doesn't bode too well for movies, but for the Wachowski siblings, the delay to complete special effects work may have been a blessing in disguise for their latest, *Jupiter Ascending*. Whatever impact it could have managed back then would surely have been obliterated just a few weeks later with the release of a small sci-fi film by the name of *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

After an initially slow start and some unnecessary cutting between Jupiter Jones' (Kunis) hum-drum Chicago-bound existence, and action in space, *Jupiter Ascending* settles down to a chase movie where everyone seems to want Jupiter, some alive, some would prefer her dead, but she's no idea why. Eventually protected by bounty hunter Caine Wise (Tatum), a "lyncantant" whose DNA is spliced with that of a dog, and his nifty flying "skyjacker" boots, Jupiter needs to find out why everyone is after her, negotiate the various machinations of the individual

members of the powerful intergalactic Abrasax family, and discover why everyone keeps avoiding explaining what exactly "harvesting a planet" entails when it comes to the industry underpinning the intergalactic economy.

Once it starts firing on all engines, it turns into a quite enjoyable action film, albeit one with a bit of a reliance on falling set pieces (thanks to those flying boots) but definitely one with its own sense of style and some interesting background details. The Wachowskis may not have come up with a world as rich as Frank Herbert's *Dune*, but the inspiration is clear to see with references to family houses, their roles as space-based industrialists, and a peace-keeping "Aegis" corp to make sure everyone plays by the (corporate) rules. It may not have the spice melange but it has its own version of the most precious substance in the universe.

First and foremost, though, *Jupiter Ascending* is an action film, and one that, initially, comes as something of a disappointment from the makers of *The*

Matrix. Many of the action sequences appear less ambitious than their previous work, perhaps because of the added work required to make the audience believe a dog-spliced human can fly. Caine's skyboots are pretty cool, along with the motions he uses to control them, but the Wachowskis focus on him at just the wrong moments, either a few seconds too early or too late, leaving the resultant slo-mo sections looking stilted. The practical and CGI creature effects fare better, with some excellent lizard aliens, but the action does improve as the film progresses and moves into space, with tech and ships which mostly consist of whirling pieces of metal held together by force fields.

The space station from 2001: *A Space Odyssey* appears to crop up in an odd cameo, as does a very well known director whose appearance caps a comedic set-piece in an over-the-top bureaucracy that seems only to exist to set up his cameo. Kunis gets some jokes here and there, but mostly it sticks to the action beats.

For 90% of the film, the 3D is almost unnoticeable apart from one or two vertigo-inducing sequences near the end, more of which would have been welcome.

Kunis and Tatum do their usual stand-up job as likeable leads, although the film does rely a little too much on relegating Kunis to damsel in distress in the first half. This is down to her relative powerlessness against the threats she faces, however once she's clued in she becomes a much more formidable character without suddenly becoming an unrealistic badass overnight.

As for the rest of the cast, Sean Bean gives a good "Sean Bean" and Eddie Redmayne entertainingly competes for the "Michael Sheen *Twilight*: Breaking Dawn Sudden Onset Overacting Award" with multiple interpretations and intonations of Sheen's unpredictable giggle from that film.

The result is an enjoyable space adventure and slightly weak love story with an interesting background that takes some of the action of *Guardians* with some... well... a little, maybe a spoonful, of the brains of *Dune*, that would have most likely been lost in the wake of Marvel/Disney's blockbuster last summer but should hopefully find an audience now.

IAIN MCNALLY

EXPECTED ★★★★★★★★ 6

ACTUAL ★★★★★★★★ 8



ROBOT OVERLORDS

CERT: PG / DIRECTOR: JON WRIGHT / SCREENPLAY: JON WRIGHT, MARK STAY / STARRING: GILLIAN ANDERSON, BEN KINGSLEY, CALLAN MCAULIFFE, ELLA HUNT, MILO PARKER / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 27TH

Three years ago, a force of robots from a distant world conquered Earth and gave humanity one rule to survive: stay in your homes or be vaporised. But Sean Flynn (McAuliffe) is convinced that his father, an RAF pilot who fought in the war, is still alive. One day, when he and his gang figure out a way to break the robots' curfew, they begin an adventure that will pit them against the might of the Robot Overlords.

On paper, it sounds like something in the mould of Ender's Game, which was about children up against an alien invasion. Yet there's also the fun and energetic vibe of Doctor Who about it, and the kids themselves wouldn't look too out of place in the equally fun Who spin-off, The Sarah Jane Adventures, which is no mean feat. Like that show, the kids portrayed here have rough edges, are put in jeopardy a lot, and all because they want to do what's right, which also

harkens back to films like E.T., Jurassic Park and The Goonies.

What makes Robot Overlords stand apart from something like the god-awful Transformers: Age of Extinction is that it always knows that the four kids (Callan McAuliffe, Ella Hunt, James Tarpey and Milo Parker) are the centre of the story and where it needs to focus on to maintain a strong human emotional engagement with the audience and not just have the film become a dreary mosh pit of giant robots smashing buildings with huge explosions.

The four child actors give solid performances (plaudits to Ella Hunt) and have great chemistry and lots of great dynamics with one another, which results in some moments being presented to us in a somewhat naturalistic manner. Ben Kingsley gets to dust off his pantomime villain shtick that worked so well for him in

Thunderbirds and Iron Man 3, and the great Gillian Anderson is always watchable.

Director Jon Wright is determined to make this a fun, if at times intense, family adventure movie, and does bring a light touch to it whenever he can. The visuals are consistently eye-catching, and whilst the special effects are not revolutionary in any way, they are on that same level of effects quality as seen in some of Doctor Who.

The only area where the film goes awry is with some of its humour and dialogue, because occasionally it becomes a little confused if it wants to be a family film or a teen adventure (some of the language may challenge ratings for small youngsters) though there are some nice gags, particularly the scene where Sean, in control of one of the giant robots, gets it to scratch its metallic groin. Plus, towards the end of the movie, there is a possible romantic subplot going on between two of the main characters that is brought in far too late and isn't properly developed.

Overall, Robot Overlords isn't groundbreaking or up there with the all-time greats, but whereas Michael Bay treats his audiences like cattle with his trashy Transformers movies, the filmmakers and actors of this movie respects them and wants them to join in with the fun. Ultimately, it's Doctor Who or The Sarah Jane Adventures meets The Goonies, which is nothing to be ashamed of.

RYAN POLLARD



EXPECTED ★★★★★★★★ 6

ACTUAL ★★★★★★★★ 8



THE SIGNAL

CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: WILLIAM EUBANK / SCREENPLAY: CARLYLE EUBANK, WILLIAM EUBANK, DAVID FRIGERIO / STARRING: BRENTON THWAITES, OLIVIA COOKE, BEAU KNAPP, LAURENCE FISHBURNE, LIN SHAYE / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 27TH

While escorting his girlfriend Haley (Cooke) cross country to Caltech, Nic (Thwaites), along with his friend Jonah (Knapp), decides to track down a pesky hacker, Nomad, who has been bothering them of late - even managing to seize control of Haley's webcam. Once they reach the hacker's supposed lair however, things take a turn into Blair Witch territory, with the film switching from a realistic tone to an eerie mix of night vision and hand-held shots to freak out the audience before various incomprehensible things occur. Nic awakens in what seems to be a government facility and struggles to find out what happened to him, where his friends are, why everyone is wearing biohazard suits and what's with the oddly monotonous mannerisms of Laurence Fishburne, who keeps asking where Nic first encountered "The Signal"?

What follows next is a gradual build of interrogations, secret plotting and slow burn reveals as Nic tries to locate his friends, escape the facility and find out what the hell is going on.

Despite its initial lo-fi vibe, *The Signal* nicely sustains suspense and tension, skipping genres from buddy road trip to romantic drama to horror/sci-fi spookiness, all the while brewing up some central mysteries for our smart, MIT-attending protagonist to figure

out. Once what has happened is finally divulged (but not why it was done or by whom), the film changes gear and stages some impressive slo-mo scenes that artfully convey jeopardy without turning the film into an out and out action/adventure film.

Unfortunately, the final reveal falls somewhat flat; it's not that the explanation for everything that has gone before is a disappointment, more that the way it is handled is slightly

underwhelming, failing to leave the audience with some memorable imagery to reflect on, or to prime them for a bigger budget sequel. For this reason, *The Signal* doesn't quite live up to its *Twilight Zone* pretensions - it's more akin to a middling *Outer Limits* episode.

IAIN MCNALLY

EXPECTED ++++++ 7

ACTUAL ++++++ 6



STARBURST



WHITE GOD

CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: KORNÉL MUNDRUCZÓ / SCREENPLAY: KORNÉL MUNDRUCZÓ, VIKTÓRIA PETRÁNYI, KATA WÉBER / STARRING: ZSÓFIA PSOTTA, SÁNDOR ZSÓTÉR / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 27TH

It's the dawn of the planet of the dogs in this exceptional Hungarian film from director Kornél Mundruczó. Featuring a cast of hundreds of canines and some striking imagery of the beasts unleashed and taking to the city streets, it effortlessly blends powerful and emotional social realism with an ultimately hilarious dog apocalypse.

When 13-year-old Lili is forced by her father to get rid of her best friend and beloved mutt Hagen, it begins a story of horror and heartbreak for both the girl and her dog. Intercutting between the increasingly brutal treatment Hagen finds himself at the hands of, and Lili's descent into teen rebellion as a response to the loss of her dog, *White God* is a harsh *Homeward Bound* where the doggy star will never be the same again by the end of the story.

As Lili searches the streets for Hagen, the poor dog is at the mercy of some savage characters, and both Lili and Hagen find themselves exploited and desperate to escape their circumstances. *White God* then swerves violently into a wildly anarchic final act that is brutal, satisfying and absolutely hysterical in its level of horror.

The real star of *White God* is, of course, Hagen (played by two incredible acting canines), who turns from gorgeous innocent pet into a transformed mad monster. It's heart-breaking and terrifying to witness the level of cruelty some men are capable of and Hagen goes through hell in the film. The animal performance is astounding from the desperation in his eyes to the wild fury and

savagery he demonstrates in later scenes. Through all the chasing, taunting, fights and beatings that Hagen endures, it is clear that the dog actor was never really harmed in any way. Even if it might be obvious to the keen observer that in the dog fighting scenes, no actual harm is being done, it never distracts from the horror of events as they take place. Rest assured dog lovers, you will be cringing and sobbing at the plight Hagen finds himself in.

The human drama is less involving but Zsófia Psotta is excellent as Lili, a reasonable girl caught between her civilised desire to play trumpet in the school band and the cruelty of the ways adults around her treat animals. Also solid is her father, played by Sándor Zsótér, a man who has his daughter's best interests at heart, but a devastating lack of respect for her canine best friend.

More importantly, *White God* comes loaded with subtext. From the holocaust inspired imagery of smoking chimneys, train tracks and concentration camps to the treatment of the mixed breeds by the government, *White God* works as effectively as a social commentary as it does as entertainment.

Despite how involving events are in the majority of *White God* though, it is the final act that is the stand-out sequence and the reason this film is elevated into something truly special. Hinted at in the flash forward opening scene, a slow motion sequence of hundreds of dogs chasing Lili through

the city, it flips the film on its head and is at once horrifying, deeply satisfying and laugh out loud funny. Man's best friend becomes man's worst nightmare in this brilliant but barking mad set piece. With some spot-on homage to *The Birds*, *Jurassic Park* and more, dog lovers will be howling in their seats at the catharsis provided by the final scenes.

Furiously entertaining with a perfect ending, *White God* is like *280 Dogs Later*; an underdog story with some serious bite.

PETE TURNER

EXPECTED ★★★★★★★★ 8

ACTUAL ★★★★★★★★★★ 10





IT FOLLOWS

CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: DAVID ROBERT MITCHELL / STARRING: MAIKA MONROE, KEIR GILCHRIST, DANIEL ZOVATTO, OLIVIA LUCCARDI, JAKE WEARY, LILI SEPE / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 27TH

Sex and horror movies have gone together for decades but writer/director David Robert Mitchell gives us a film where it's intrinsic to the plot.

Young, attractive Jay (Monroe) goes on a date with the mysterious Hugh (Weary) and they end up having sex. All fairly normal, until he drugs her and she wakes up tied to chair. He explains to her that she'll be followed by something that will kill her if she doesn't have sex with someone else. If the infected person doesn't have sex with someone else, it'll kill them and move back to the previous person, and so on. The 'it' can take the form of any person, living or dead, and doesn't stop until it finds you. And no-one else can see it. Basically, it's the worst STD you can hope for – a sexually transmitted demon, if you will.

When Jay inevitably starts to see things, her friends put it down to post-traumatic stress, but one by one they realise it's real and desperately try to help her escape it.

We've had the likes of *Scream* and *Cherry Falls* deal with horror clichés like sex in a postmodern way. However, *It Follows* takes itself much more seriously, and with an effective, simple concept is one of the creepiest films in recent years. The concept might sound amusing at first, but the film is intelligent and ignores many tired factors of horror movies while maintaining a familiar formula. *It Follows* doesn't focus on the sexual aspect like many other films would, but more on the moral dilemmas Jay and her friends face, and how she literally has to

run away from her problems.

For a horror film, there are very few deaths or even major scares – a downfall given the promising start – but the suspense and tension drive the film. You end up looking over the characters' shoulders more than they do, wondering if that person walking in the background is the evil force coming to get them, or what form it's going to take (it can often look quite horrible).

The highlight of the film is the incredible electronic soundtrack, an intentional and wonderfully executed throwback to '80s horror films. The atmosphere reminds you of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Halloween*, albeit more in tune with the dream-like graphic novel *Black Hole*.

Some 'rules' are established in the film, which will no doubt be dissected by many fanboys on the forums, and much of the film's originality leaves a welcome opening for a sequel. At the London Film Festival, *STARBURST* asked Mitchell if there'd be one and he said he wasn't sure yet. He did reveal that the idea for *It Follows* came from a recurring nightmare he'd had as a child – being constantly followed by something unstoppable, a nightmare many of us can probably relate to.

JONATHAN ANDERSON

EXPECTED + + + + + + + + + + 6

ACTUAL + + + + + + + + + + 8



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TALES OF TERROR

BD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: ROGER CORMAN / SCREENPLAY: RICHARD MATHESON / STARRING: VINCENT PRICE, PETER LORRE, MAGGIE PIERCE, LEONA GAGE, JOYCE JAMESON / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 9TH

There are whispers in certain horror circles the only reason *Tales of Terror* works is little to do with Edgar Allan Poe at all. That the real reason this anthology works is due to Vincent Price and the master of low budget gothic, Roger Corman. Poe is almost an afterthought in these tales. Screenwriter Richard Matheson and Corman use the Poe catalogue as a Pick 'n' Mix selection to build this adaptation in their own loose style.

The overall technique works well for the most part. The first story, *Morella*, is an exquisite Gothic period piece. It has Corman's trademarks of burning castles and prodigal relatives. This time, Lenora (Pierce) returns to the father (Price) who abandoned her as a child, only to discover the spirit of her dead mother (Gage) has deadly plans for their daughter. Full of dust, cobwebs and melancholy, *Morella* is a delight that takes you back to a more innocent age of horror.

The *Black Cat* is the second segment and is offered as something of a comic relief or a breath between the two real terrors. Peter Lorre is on form as the drunk playing against Vincent Price's upstanding wine expert Fortunato Luchresi. This is a rebadged

version of *The Cask of Amontillado*. The *Black Cat* is a battle of wills as much as a battle of swills and swigs. The story is an examination of guilt as much as revenge, two of Poe's great themes. Though often dismissed as the weak link in *Tales of Terror*, *The Black Cat* is still enjoyable to watch.

The final story, *The Case of M. Valdemar*, reverts back to a straighter Gothic horror element and has Price playing the protagonist completely from his deathbed. He hopes the mystic hypnotist Carmichael, played by Basil Rathbone, can successfully arrest his life at the moment of death. Carmichael's intentions toward Mrs. Valdemar (played wonderfully by Debra Paget) are unscrupulous. As this is Poe, we know the path to desire and immortality will not be without manifestations of guilt. The sight of Price in the final scene is shocking even after all these years.

Tales of Terror is a film that takes the viewer back to matte-painted scenes, soundstage sets, and 19th century romantic Gothic sensibilities and is a treat for all of that. It's also become a classic for good reasons; it was the first film to pick up

Ealing's *Dead of Night* legacy, even before *Amicus*, for example. It also set the tone for Gothic horror for a generation on TV as well as cinema. So it's fantastic Arrow Films have remastered it for a new generation of viewers to enjoy.

This transfer is better than average quality, while any defects or flaws only add to the charm. That's a statement that could describe the whole of *Tales of Terror*, in fact.

ANTHONY COWIN

★★★★★★★★★ 7



STARBURST



OUIJA

BD + DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: STILES WHITE / SCREENPLAY: JULIET SNOWDEN, STILES WHITE / STARRING: OLIVIA COOKE, ANA COTO, DAREN KAGASOFF, BIANCA SANTOS, DOUGLAS SMITH, SHELLEY HENNIG / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 9TH

Michael Bay's production house, Platinum Dunes, have now evidently progressed from churning out crap horror remakes to crap horror of all varieties (um... yay for equal rights?), brings us *Ouija*. If you couldn't guess the general plot of the film from the title alone, after the mysterious suicide of

a pretty blonde teenager, her friends attempt to contact her using the titular game board to properly say goodbye (because the funeral and wake were apparently inadequate in this regard). But of course, it's not a game — or you should "keep telling yourself it's only a game," as we are told by the eye-roll-

inducing tagline that some marketing gimp actually got paid to come up with — and the gormless young things become tormented by a restless spirit who's, like, totally trying to warn them about something.

That's pretty much it in terms of story, and for the rest of the film we're subjected to a laborious excuse for a plot that stretches even its 89-minute (including the credits) running time. The characters are so thin they're barely even pale shadows of clichés, and aimless scenes that do nothing to advance what fragments of story are even present punctuate the absence of anything remotely engaging or frightening. The film even commits the cardinal sin of believing that flat-out lies are the same as misdirection when attempting to disguise a rubbish and predictable twist. Things eventually stumble towards the inadequate final confrontation, before which the surviving adolescents become armed with some sage advice from Ethnic Granny, along with the vaguely-offensive associated implication that only less civilised people (i.e. those of descent other than white European) have any notion

of the supernatural and how to effectively combat it.

The only presence of any note is from main girl Laine, played by Olivia Cooke (*The Quiet Ones*; *Bates Motel*) and who is far better than she's allowed to be by the illiterate script from director Stiles White and Juliet Snowden (yes, it took two people to write this shit), while the doomed Debbie (Shelley Hennig, Teen Wolf's semi-feral were-coyote Malia) is one of the film's least boring characters despite checking out 10 minutes into it. Many scenes take place in the deceased girl's bedroom, and using its lavish adornments to make up stories about her while attempting to suss out her personality is far more interesting than anything actually happening on screen.

Everything in *Ouija* has been done many times before, and far better, in films that weren't any good, making the entire experience even more of a futile exercise in frustrated time wasting than usual.

ANDREW MARSHALL

★★★★★★★ 3



EXTRATERRESTRIAL

BD + DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: COLIN MINIHAN / SCREENPLAY: COLIN MINIHAN, STUART ORTIZ / STARRING: BRITTANY ALLEN, FREDDIE STROMA, MELANIE PAPALIA, JESSE MOSS, GIL BELLOW, MICHAEL IRONSIDE / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 16TH

Extraterrestrial features a bog-standard horror set-up (one of many aspects that liken the picture to more of a slasher flick at times). April (Brittany Allen) and Kyle (Freddie Stroma) prepare for a break away to April's father's old cabin in the woods (sound familiar?), only for Kyle to drop it on her that his mates are coming along too. All becomes clear though as Kyle has a proposition for her but things are interrupted when a craft crashes nearby. So obviously, these kids must investigate but when they

meet the inhabitants of said craft and incur their wrath, they are in for the fight of their lives. From the opening abduction scene, you are sure that *The Vicious Brothers* are not going to be gunning for originality and that is indeed the case.

Cabin in the woods, drunken, profane mates, mirror jump-scares, shower hiding, weed farms, a sheriff on a mission — there is a galaxy of clichés here for hardened genre fans to see. If you are looking for a brave new voice in this genre,

you will leave disappointed. Yet, while *Extraterrestrial* does not particularly reinvent the wheel, it has to be said that the film looks rather impressive. The special effects are brilliant (aside from some very iffy looking military helicopters in the climax) and the aliens themselves look quite animalistic and imposing. True, it all gets a bit much with the recycled red-lit UFO scenes and overload of effects in the closing part of the film, but we have seen worse effects (and acting for that matter) in films that get a mainstream distribution.

It is a shame that the script did not restrain itself, because you cannot help but somewhat admire the work that has gone into this; but that does not excuse some major issues within. *The Vicious Brothers* cut their teeth with the effective (if overrated) *Grave Encounters*, and it's seriously ill-judged sequel, but *Extraterrestrial* is more fun; sharing a heck of a lot of surprising similarities with the recent remake of *Friday the 13th* (which will signify, perhaps, how you will take to it). There is no doubting that the plot treats very familiar and well-worn ground and that modern horror's

infuriating necessity to have a-hole characters is indeed a factor here too. That said, Brittany Allen and Freddie Stroma are likable leads and familiar faces Gil Bellows and Michael Ironside seem to be having fun with some of the cheese.

Extraterrestrial has not picked up especially outstanding feedback on its festival run, but in terms of Saturday night gory thrills it does its job well enough. The aliens actually look great, and while the climax is clearly a rip off of H.R. Giger's *Alien* backdrops, the grossly-rendered sets are effective. The plot, dialogue, and supporting characters pull the film back from the promise offered by some X-Files-esque opening titles and an actually quite effectively morbid closing act that suggests the dangers of the earth are very bit as great as the dangers surrounding it. *Extraterrestrial* is an untaxing albeit regularly clichéd watch, but still a fun dose of sci-fi horror, even if the search for a truly great modern alien horror goes on.

JACK BOTTOMLEY

★★★★★★★ 6



SIRIUS

DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: AMARDEEP SINGH KALEKA / SCREENPLAY: AMARDEEP SINGH KALEKA, LAURIE KNAPP / STARRING: THOMAS JANE, JACK AUMAN, CORRADO BALDUCCI / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 9TH

The United States (aka the World) is governed by the Military Industrial Complex (MIC) and by a cartel of four powerful banks that have a vested interest in oil. Aliens from outer space have visited us in the past, as recorded in religious texts and renaissance paintings, and they have returned again because we started testing and using atomic bombs. The aliens are rightly concerned that we will destroy ourselves and other planets. That's the agenda set out by Dr Steven Greer, who is

shown by this documentary as a hero crusading against the conspiracy that hides the truth about these alien visitations and their free energy technology that could easily release us from the grip of the banks and the MIC, and the mainstream media of course.

Greer, a former emergency room doctor, is shown lecturing to an audience that hangs on to every word he says and believes the films of blobs of light he shows on the screen behind him are the

vehicles of extraterrestrial visitors. He acknowledges Dr Allen Hynek's close encounters classification system, the one that Steven Spielberg used to title his Close Encounters of the Third Kind movie, and adds his own close encounter of the fifth kind. This encompasses the concept of seeking out and establishing psychic/telepathic communication with extraterrestrials through meditation. Is Greer serious, sorry serious? Is this a spoof? There is nothing particularly new about his ideas - George Adamski, and many other contactees of the 1950s who said they met the occupants of spacecraft, had rides in them to nearby planets and were warned about the dangers of the atomic bomb.

We can dismiss Greer's encounter group meetings at remote UFO hotspots as New Age mumbo jumbo, and his special workshops that teach you about 'The Science of Consciousness and higher states of consciousness and how it applies to us and to Interstellar Civilisations and their technologies', but the resourceful Greer has

some solid evidence for the existence of aliens. This evidence is nothing less than a miniature alien corpse. The PR for the film promised that it would present "paradigm shifting physical evidence of a medically and scientifically analyzed DNA sequenced humanoid creature of unknown classification." Though in reality there is no conclusive proof it is of an alien origin, and the media is blamed for ignoring its existence. All part of the cover-up to keep the established powers in control.

Using crowd sourcing to fund this production, it is a good-looking and well-presented film, but it is all based on a stack of suppositions to support the idea of a utopian future where we'll communicate with extraterrestrials and enjoy the benefits of free energy. For sceptics its shows how an ET-based cult can be created and sustained in a world where the word of authority is regarded with deep suspicion.

NIGEL WATSON

★★★★★★★★★★ 6



WOLVES

DVD / CERT: 18 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: DAVID HAYTER / STARRING: LUCAS TILL, STEPHEN MCHATTIE, JASON MOMOA, JOHN PYPER-FERGUSON / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 2ND

Credited for the screenplay of X-Men and Watchmen, David Hayter goes a little more supernatural than superhero with his directorial debut Wolves, starring Lucas Till as disturbed teen Cayden alongside co-stars Stephen McHattie and Jason Momoa.

Cayden was the popular kid in school, the top football player with the hot girlfriend. It all comes to an end when he starts to have violent nightmares. Eventually he blacks out,

waking up to find his parents torn to pieces. Forced to flee, he wanders aimlessly until he meets the ominous Wild Joe (Pyper-Ferguson), a werewolf who sets Cayden on a path to discover who he really is. A small town conveniently named Lupine Ridge is where Cayden unearths his true history.

For a low budget horror the make-up effects are pretty impressive, though for a straight-up horror flick it's much too Teen Wolf and

should be more American Werewolf in London. What is most impressive about this film is the lack of exposition; usually with these films it's pouring into your ears every five minutes, but with Wolves the plot proceeds quickly without unnecessary filler for what is a straightforward storyline.

Hayter pulls off an interesting concept but the same can't be said for the execution of the plot or the performances. Lucas Till plays a very serious and brooding wolf that you just can't actually take that seriously, very reminiscent of Robert Pattinson's Edward Cullen.

Many werewolf flicks tend to have their own origin and rules. These wolves do not transform by the full moon but through adrenaline. Think Hulk but smaller and with fur. The teen angst thing is slightly overbearing and the tone of the film isn't quite clear either. It has its entertaining moments, but the plot takes a funny turn, not in a laugh out loud kind of way, and suddenly the film isn't as fun anymore.

Extras: Deleted scenes / Gag reel

SAMANTHA WARD

★★★★★★★★★★ 4





THE SINGING BIRD WILL COME

VOD / CERT: TBC / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: IAIN ROSS-McNAMEE / STARRING: GILLIAN HARKER, CHARLES O'NEILL, LAURA WILSON, AARON JEFFCOATE / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Moving back home to the north from London when she loses her job, her mother dies, and her relationship fails; Lauren (Harker) has a lot to contend with. A father who has resorted to the bottle to cope with his loss, a wayward and angry brother, bitchy friends and a job that's beneath her as a night cleaner in local restaurant. It's while working she begins to see a presence and feel a mournful spirit. She discovers a waitress went missing almost twenty

years ago, and is convinced it's her manifestation that is making itself known to the susceptible but inquisitive Lauren.

With an incredibly small budget, writer/director Ross-McNamee has managed to craft a film which embodies the essence of the classic British ghost story. Aside from a few moments that could be inspired by the Japanese/Korean horror films of the late nineties, it has a brooding atmosphere of the classic tales of M. R. James

and the like. With the heavy prominence of loss as a theme, it strikes more than a few chords, without becoming too clichéd. Despite being a first-time director, he manages to create some fantastic scenes of terror that are dripping with anxiety. Without resorting to too many cheap jump shocks (and those that are present are well executed), and with the help of a complementary and impressive score and sound design, the film draws the viewer in, building the tension to tangible levels.

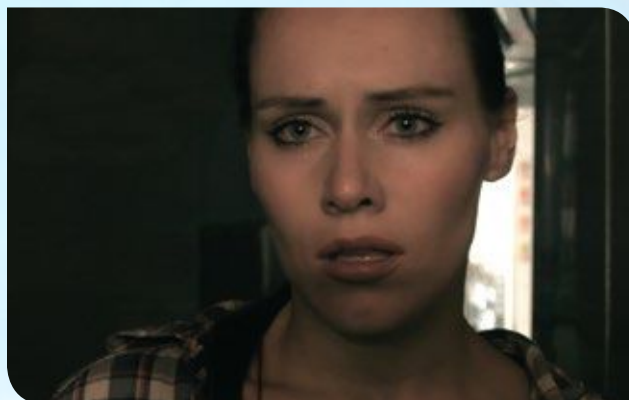
The final product belies the budget, coming

across as much more lavish production, despite the (occasional obvious) inexperienced cast members. Gillian Harker is in practically every scene and is brilliant as the lead; thoroughly convincing and completely captivating. She and director Ross-McNamee, whose confidence behind the camera is quite remarkable, are names to watch out for in the future.

If only all low budget films could be like this...

MARTIN UNSWORTH

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



METROPOLIS (ULTIMATE COLLECTOR'S EDITION)

BD / CERT: PG / DIRECTOR: FRITZ LANG / SCREENPLAY: THEA VON HARBOU / STARRING: ALFRED ABEL, GUSTAV FR ÖLICH, RUDOLF KLEIN-ROGGE, FRITZ RASP, THEODOR LOOS, ERWIN BISWANGER, HEINRICH GEORGE / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

We've heard Metropolis being referred to as the first sci-fi movie. It isn't. You might have heard the BBC recently describe it as the first feature-length sci-fi film. Still wrong; it's not even close. There were some pretty long sci-fi movies well over a decade before Fritz Lang blew five million Reichsmark on this one. Metropolis isn't really the first anything, so what's all the fuss about? Glad you asked. You

see, this is probably one of the most iconic movies, not just of early cinema, but in the history of film. The best silent movies were all about visual impact (obviously) and there aren't many films more stunning to look at than Metropolis. Never has a movie been more worthy of a Blu-ray release and with this 2010 restoration you get to see it in all its original 150-minute bum-numbing glory. One can

only wonder at what an audience of 1927 thought of it. Well, actually they weren't particularly impressed: it bombed.

In case the film has passed you by then let's just say it's classic dystopian fare; a future living in the grim shadow of uncontrolled continuing industrial revolution where the almost zombified workers toil beneath the gleaming towers that are home to the means-of-production owning elite [Marxist theory this early in the review? – Ed]. Topical stuff in the '20s. The story is about the idle son of one of the elite (Fröhlich) descending to the lower city, lustily in pursuit of Maria (Helm) who is a sort of underground leader among the workers. She gets replaced by a robot-double (you know, the one that starts out looking like C3PO) that causes all sorts of counter-revolutionary bother until it all ends with a biblical-grade flood and a witch-burning. In all honesty, it's a bit tedious. But never mind the plot; it's still as dazzling to look at as it was then. In fact, possibly more so. Those art deco designs were just reflecting the time when it was made; now they're part of the past and Metropolis has nearly 90 years-worth of being part

of our iconographic landscape to add to its impact: this is the stuff of album covers. That's probably why the 1927 audience weren't quite as enamored with it as we are. After all, Star Wars (1977) was only a huge success because of the power of its story. [That was irony, right? – Ed]

So basically, if you're not familiar with Metropolis then this massively influential piece of cinema is something you need to see (if only because Ridley Scott has); if you already are then you might as well get this version because it's Blu-ray, has an interesting commentary and a load of documentaries. Mind you, hope you're interested in Germans talking about film restoration because there's rather a lot of that on the disc. Oh, and you also get the 1984 Giorgio Moroder version if Bonnie Tyler is your thing. Well, it might be. Who are we to judge?

Extras: Audio Commentary / Giorgio Moroder's 1984 version / Three documentaries / 56-page booklet

JOHN KNOTT

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



THE KILLING (1956) / KILLER'S KISS (1955)

BD / CERT: 12 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: STANLEY KUBRICK / STARRING: STERLING HAYDEN, COLEEN GRAY, FRANK SILVERA, JAMIE SMITH / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

The second feature by legendary filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, *Killer's Kiss* is about Davy Gordon (Smith), a prizefighter, who rescues a private dancer, Gloria Price (Irene Kane), from being attacked by her employer and on-off lover Vincent Rapallo (Silvera). This chance encounter just happens to bring the two together and they start to become involved with each other, to the immediate displeasure of Rapallo. It's not too long that he starts sending men out to kill Davy; but instead they kill his manager and best friend. They then kidnap Gloria, and it's up to Davy to save her. On the back of that, we also have Kubrick's third

feature, *The Killing*, which is a heist movie about a small-time crook, Johnny Clay (Hayden), who has got out of prison and begins to mastermind a complex race-track heist in order to use the money to start a new life with his girlfriend. However, Clay's scheme becomes complicated and soon escalates out of control by the intervention of the scheming, manipulative wife of a teller who's in on the scheme.

Kubrick has stated that *Killer's Kiss* was at a student level of filmmaking, but it's still a fascinating movie to look back on, as it's a notable film noir thriller in its own right. It's a film about isolation and loneliness

where the three main characters are all alone, with their roots almost severed due to something that had happened in their past that was once happy, but is now gone from them. In the end, these characters are all solitary in a big city at the end of the line. The film starts with a slow manner that is confident and quiet, and Kubrick uses this as a means to develop the characters and their backstories more, and for nearly half the film you can't really tell where the plot is going. Yet, Kubrick gives us a way inside the characters' heads, which allows us to get a deep feeling and understanding of them, even if the character of Rapallo is slimy and warped.

With *The Killing*, Kubrick appears to have taken everything that he learnt from making *Killer's Kiss* and puts that to excellent use, and it's by this time that Kubrick intently defined his style. It's nearly sixty years old, but it still holds up and doesn't look at all dated. Kubrick took Lionel White's hard-boiled, non-linear narrative about this one man (played with quick-talking, straightforward ease by the great Sterling Hayden) and his

crew planning and tasking this robbery, and yet, the film seems to have characters and themes that can be both identifiable and recognisable with any period it's set in. Even the supporting players are as sharply defined and psychologically involving, if not more so, than the main protagonist. What also makes this dark, sprawling and intense thriller shine is its dramatic cinematic direction, a grandiose musical score that produces shivers down your spine, and gorgeous cinematography to die for.

Ultimately, both *Killer's Kiss* and *The Killing* serve as a great noir double-bill that not only help define film noir cinema, but also define Stanley Kubrick as a true bona fide auteur, even before he dazzled and surprised us with his more recognisable works such as 2001: A Space Odyssey and A Clockwork Orange.

Extras: Ben Wheatley appreciation / French TV extract with Sterling Hayden interview / Trailers / Collector's booklet

RYAN POLLARD

★★★★★★★★★ 9



CONTINUUM

DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: RICHIE MEHTA / STARRING: GILLIAN ANDERSON, RUFUS SEWELL, HALEY JOEL OSMENT, VICTOR GARBER / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 9TH

Continuum, not to be confused with the Canadian TV series of the same name, takes a look at time travel in an incredibly dramatic way. If you could go back in time and rewrite history, would you?

The film takes a look at the classic story of time travel in a way that you initially wouldn't expect. The story starts with a young scientist (played by *Dark City*'s Rufus Sewell) who mysteriously disappears on a business trip, and the resulting struggle that his wife

(Gillian Anderson) and son (a surprisingly grown up Haley Joel Osmert) are faced with after his sudden disappearance. But there's far more to this story than just a dark drama; whilst it may seem like a lengthy epic of the family's struggles with the father's disappearance over the years, there's a far more intriguing and well thought-out story underneath.

With all of its layers of human drama and character arcs, there's a real sci-fi story underneath, one that would surprisingly fit in

rather well as an episode of cult TV series *Fringe*. *Continuum* is a well thought-out and certainly well researched look at time travel that will make you think twice, using a valid theory from the world of quantum mechanics to build on a gripping story of time travel. How many of us have wanted to see Everett's many-worlds theory put into real use? The plot twist will certainly have you on the edge of the sofa waiting to see how it turns out.

Whilst time travel has for some been done to death in movies, *Continuum* takes a refreshingly different look at this classic sci-fi plot. The drama may be a little too heavy at times for some, but it's all part of the build up to the unexpected twist at the end. It certainly makes for compelling viewing, with a stunning soundtrack that brings out the tension in the film even more, in part thanks to the great direction and writing of Richie Mehta.

More of a drama interwoven with science fiction, this is as much a story retracing the father's steps as it is of the struggle to bring the time travel theory to life. With as many twists and turns towards the end as the character stories that build up along the

way, it's certainly not light-hearted viewing but is a compelling story that's worth watching.

Previously released as *I'll Follow You Down* in the U.S, *Continuum* is certainly a much more fitting title for this dramatic story of science fiction. Whilst it may have been filmed on a tight budget, the compelling acting and science behind the story bring it together perfectly. You'll certainly be glad that you gave it a try.

LEONA TURFORD

★★★★★★★★★ 9





DREW: THE MAN BEHIND THE POSTER

VOD / CERT: E / DIRECTOR: ERIK SHARKEY / SCREENPLAY: VARIOUS / STARRING: DREW STRUZAN, STEVEN SPIELBERG, GUILLERMO DEL TORO, HARRISON FORD, MICHAEL J. FOX / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

What would be your favourite movie poster? Maybe it's the one for *Back to the Future* with Marty McFly standing next to the DeLorean and staring at his watch in amazement? How about the legendary *Return of the Jedi* artwork showing the lightsaber duel between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader with the latter's helmet malevolently dominating the background? Surely the poster for John Carpenter's *The Thing* showing hypnotic, startling light bursting from the hood of a parka would be up there?

Whatever your choice, there is a very good chance it will have been created by Drew Struzan, a man who has quietly, yet significantly, influenced filmgoers for around 40 years with his paintings as much as any of the numerous legendary directors for whom he became the go-to guy.

Beginning his career creating album covers, including an iconic piece of work for Alice Cooper's *Welcome to My Nightmare*, Drew's talent was quickly recognised and offers for more lucrative film posters began to

flood in. Not until he produced art for a little known film called *Star Wars*, though, did things really begin to change for him.

Erik Sharkey's documentary, *Drew: The Man Behind the Poster*, does exactly what it needs to do, but perhaps doesn't do any more than that. There are an abundance of interviews with Drew himself, his wife, and an impressive roll call of Hollywood royalty from Steven Spielberg to Guillermo del Toro, and the praise for his work verges on the euphoric. There is no doubt that Drew's posters have sold cinema seats as much as any trailer could, and with credits including the Indiana Jones series and *Blade Runner* there is no doubt that the often used word "legend" is extremely apt in his case. Where the film does miss the mark slightly is in the slight repetition of this praise, with the only dark career shadow cast by an unscrupulous management team who siphoned off money and original works. Even that works out well in the end.

The difficulty the filmmakers faced is that Drew is a quiet, unassuming man who just wants to paint and perhaps, while being one of the unsung heroes of

modern pop culture, hasn't led the rock n' roll lifestyle that makes a documentary fizz with illicit revelations and dark secrets. This is a man who has carved out an extraordinary career, for the most part under the radar, existing in a world in which a perfect poster remains imprinted on your brain, but may never lead you to ask the question of who painted it.

Certainly appealing more to an age group that grew up without the instant rush of social media and the ability to source anything, anytime, *Drew: The Man Behind the Poster* will twang nostalgic heartstrings and stir memories of seeing these amazing movie posters for the first time. That said, this is a hugely enjoyable, non-invasive portrait of a man whose work speaks louder than his words, and for that alone is essential viewing for anyone with a passing interest in the art form.

Iconic is another word too often used, but in the case of Drew Struzan, so much of his work is.

JOHN TOWNSEND

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



KAMISAMA DOLLS SERIES COLLECTION

DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: SEIJI KISHI / SCREENPLAY: MAKOTO UEZU / STARRING: NOBUHIKO OKAMOTO, MISATO FUKUEN, AI KAYANO, RYOHEI KIMURA / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Based on the manga series by Hajime Yamamura, *Kamisama Dolls* follows Kyohei Kuga as he moves to Tokyo to break away from his small town origins. While in the big city, and just before a babbled attempt to ask out the girl of his dreams, he stumbles upon the classic mood killer of a bloody corpse in an elevator; an incident which unravels Kyohei's past and the fantastical secrets of his former town, where certain individuals

called 'sekis' possess the ability to control ancient gods through mind powers.

At least, that's how it begins. Once you're beyond the opening episodes, *Kamisama Dolls* quickly buries itself in branching plot lines and additional characters. There's Kyohei's younger sister Utao, who's struggling to control her ancient god pet; some business types trying to unearth the secrets

of said gods; Kyohei's past and twisted connection with a deadly assassin called Aki; the awkwardly handled romance between Kyohei and Hibino; then a random twin brother to Utao turns up but is quickly forgotten about to make room for everything else.

It's frustrating, because the show can be enjoyable when honed to its core. A flashback episode revolved around Kyohei and Aki halfway through the series proves memorable purely because it trims the excess and doesn't throw plot lines towards the audience at random.

After this highlight however, *Kamisama Dolls* descends wildly into a convoluted mess; losing any intrigue under its lofty ambitions and the exhaustive tonal switches between comical fun and clunky melodrama.

While often all too common in anime, there's also some cringeworthy camera lingering on some of the female characters. Most notably on Hibino San, or as she's commonly referred to by others in the show, 'the girl with the big tits'. The bad taste hangs beyond the main show too, with a baffling DVD extra of her

working out in her swimsuit for a few awkward minutes.

What feels promising at the outset of *Kamisama Dolls* soon dissipates underneath muddled plots, irritating characters and a poorly executed finale. There is certainly something here to salvage from its opening few episodes if a second series materialises, but in its current form, *Kamisama Dolls* is best left to your imagination.

Extras: *Shorts / Japanese promos / Japanese commercials / Textless opening and closing / Artwork gallery / Trailers*

ADAM STARKEY

★★★★★★★★★★ 5





COHERENCE

DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: JAMES WARD BYRKIT /
STARRING: EMILY BALDONI, MAURY STERLING, NICHOLAS BRENDON /
RELEASED: OUT NOW

"[Coherence] contains several distinct concepts, which are limited cases that never occur in reality but allow an understanding of the physics of waves, and has become a very important concept in quantum physics." Thank you, Wikipedia. But come on, you lot are sci-fi fans so you're bound to know someone geeky enough to explain it better than that. You see, this is what Coherence is (probably) all about. We think

that's what it's about anyway. If we're honest, we'd have to say our A-level physics is a bit rusty, but they mention Schrödinger's cat at some point so that's good enough for us (and please don't write in if we've got it wrong – this is a film review, not our homework). But if Austrian thought experiments of the '30s aren't your thing, don't worry; this is not a film you have to entirely understand to enjoy (and that's probably just

as well for those of us who review these things).

Eight friends meet for a dinner party on the night a comet is passing overhead. Weird stuff begins to happen (phone screens spontaneously crack) and it's all blamed on the aforementioned comet because you can normally blame most things on a comet (including the Norman Conquest). When the lights go out, only a single house a couple of blocks away seems to have power. Two of the guests investigate and discover a very similar dinner party. They also return with a box containing a table tennis bat and photographs of all eight guests with apparently random numbers written on the back. Then things get really weird...

Sounds intriguing? Well it is. It sucks you right in and keeps you wanting to know more. It's made on a pretty small budget (it was filmed in five days in the director's house) with just those eight actors but the largely improvised performances are all top-notch. Low budget movies can be let down by the director recruiting his mates,

but when your mates include the likes of Nicholas Brendon (we're embarrassed to admit we spent at least half an hour trying to remember where we'd seen him before) then that's not so much of a problem. There are a few scares on the way and a great deal of entertaining confusion, but what we were most impressed by was the fact that it ends up making a certain amount of sense. These kinds of messed-up-reality movies can often really disappoint in the end when the ideas run out and the film needs to finish, but Coherence even manages a decent climax and twisty conclusion.

Any faults? Well, apart from the fact that comets don't look like that, "There was this comet in Finland" is one of the dumbest lines we've ever heard. But it is improvised and people do say dumb stuff...

Incidentally, "coherence" was an answer on last week's University Challenge but it was a physics question, not a film round. [Thanks for that – Ed]

JOHN KNOTT

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



KUNG FU KILLER

DVD / CERT: 18 / DIRECTOR: TEDDY CHAN / SCREENPLAY: TIN SHU MAK /
STARRING: DONNIE YEN, BAOQIANG WANG, CHARLIE YEUNG / RELEASE DATE:
FEBRUARY 23RD

Rocking up to a police station covered in blood and announcing, 'I killed someone' should be an arresting way to open a movie. However, Kung Fu Killer falls at the first hurdle; director Teddy Chan's far more comfortable with fight scenes than wringing any dramatic tension out of dialogue or performance.

A bloodied martial arts instructor, Hahou Mo (Yen), admits to murder in the first scene and then Kung Fu Killer picks up with him three years

later as he is serving his prison sentence for letting his fists get the better of him. When Hahou learns of the murder of a fellow kung fu master, he insists on seeing the detective in charge of the investigation. Offering his help and some inside information on who the killer is and who will be the next target, Hahou is released from prison to help catch the murderer. Fung has a score to settle and is picking off martial arts exponents one by one, killing them in methods that each

victim is renowned for their skill in. The first's beaten to death with fists, the next kicked to death, and another's killed by weapons. Hahou's dubious alliance with the detective is made even more tenuous when he goes missing after his first encounter with the handicapped but determined killer Fung.

As a piece of Hong Kong action cinema, Kung Fu Killer is an enjoyable romp. Furious fists fly around, bones crunch and blood spatters. It's got plenty for martial arts fans to enjoy. Donnie Yen is one of the best at what he does and he is more than matched by the spectacular Baoqiang Wang who excels as the lethal villain, giving a wonderfully OTT performance. His wild facial expressions perfectly complement his impressive fighting skills and when Kung Fu Killer finally gets to the promised face-off between the pair, it certainly delivers.

Director Chan definitely knows his way around a fight scene, even if on occasion you wish there could be less of the choppy editing and more moments where the martial arts is allowed to breathe in long,

uninterrupted takes. Kung Fu Killer could also do with a bit more splatter, its villain being memorably determined to fight every opponent to the death but the really nasty stuff often being shied away from. Chan has years of experience in Hong Kong action cinema but he could still have taken some tips from the brutality of The Raid.

It's the dramatic scenes where Kung Fu Killer really loses the plot. Chan shoots it all like a glossy episode of CSI but the average performances are not helped at all by the annoyingly intrusive score. Apart from the odd stunning time lapse of Hong Kong and the mostly brilliantly choreographed fight scenes, it often feels sloppily edited, overly-lit and over-egged. Nevertheless, if you go into Kung Fu Killer for the fights, you'll agree with the villain when half way through the climactic duel he states simply, 'This is fun'. Also, Hong Kong cinema and martial arts fans will get a real kick out of the bountiful number of legendary cameos.

PETE TURNER

★★★★★★★★★★ 6



THIEF

BD / CERT: 18 / DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: MICHAEL MANN / STARRING: JAMES CAAN, TUESDAY WELD, WILLIE NELSON, JAMES BELUSHI / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Michael Mann has had a patchy few years in the post-Heat wilderness. The Insider, Collateral, Miami Vice and Public Enemies were all solid films, but they weren't classic Mann, not in the way that Heat or Manhunter were or indeed Thief is.

It's tough to pick a definitive Mann film. Logic would dictate that Heat is the obvious choice,

but there are two other standout classics in his oeuvre that are pretty strong contenders. The first is Manhunter, Mann's foray into the world of Hannibal Lecter (and one of this writer's personal favourites), and the second is Thief, which finally gets a long overdue Blu-ray release.

Based on Frank Hohimer's The Home Invaders, Thief tells

the story of James Caan's safe cracker and thief, who allows himself to be drawn into a job working for the mob as a way to help him start a normal life and family. Of course, the mob being the mob, it's never that simple.

This is classic Mann, from the loving way Chicago is lit and shot (which looks stunning in this new transfer) to the Tangerine Dream soundtrack to a great scene set in a diner. The script is sharp and tight, allowing you time to get to know and care about the characters, without getting in the way of the story and moving the action forward.

On the performance side, this is very much Caan's film and he turns in (arguably) his career best performance as Frank, a good man who does the wrong things for the right reasons. Caan plays every element of the character perfectly, conveying both the confident swagger of a man who knows his business and what he wants and the emotion of a man in love looking for normality in life by getting deeper into a life of crime.

This being an Arrow release, the film comes packed with extras, including two versions of the film, the 2001 episode

from The Directors series which focuses on Mann's career (up to – at that time – Ali), a commentary, and two interviews with Caan (one from 1981 and one from 2014). You also get an accompanying booklet (not available at the time of review) containing an essay on the film.

Extras: Audio commentary with Michael Mann and James Caan / The Directors: Michael Mann / Three featurettes / Trailer / Reversible sleeve / Illustrated booklet

STUART MULRAIN

★★★★★★★★★★ 9



IN ORDER OF DISAPPEARANCE

DVD / CERT: 15 / DIRECTOR: HANS PETTER MOLAND / SCREENPLAY: KIM FUPZ AAKESON / STARRING: STELLAN SKARSGÅRD, KRISTOFER HIVJU, BIRGITTE HJORT SØRENSEN, PÅL SVERRE HAGEN, BRUNO GANZ / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Stellan Skarsgård is Nils Dickman, a stoical Swedish snowplough driver working in Norway who wins a "Citizen of the Year" award ("You're the most Norwegian person around without actually being Norwegian") before drug dealers kill his son. He then embarks on a shamolic killing

spree, working his way up through the ranks of this drug organisation in order to get to the bottom of this terrible tragedy. All this has makings of an angsty revenge thriller steeped in nihilism, especially with its mournful chiming score and recurrent end-of-scene slo-mo techniques. However,

the tone is surprisingly more absurdist, as this snowblinded black comedy is essentially a Scandi-noir becoming Scandi-blanc.

At the centre of the film is Skarsgård's performance, and he brilliantly does what can only be described as a deadpan hangdog rendering. The whole film takes place in this snowbound area with a lot of bright glaring colours, and a lot of people have made the comparison with the Coen Brothers' work, especially Fargo to some extent, as well as the work of Quentin Tarantino with the gangster characters talking to each other about stuff that seems incidental whilst being involved in acts of strange violence.

The original Norwegian title Kraftidioten ("the prize idiot") tells you more about the tone of the film than the English-language title does, because as the body count mounts up, the deaths and disappearances become more and more absurdist and insane. The film definitely has a blackly comic tone to it, which is juxtaposed against this white landscape. It's sort of a satirical, wry, somewhat

darkly morbid take on the traditional Death Wish formula, with Skarsgård stepping into Charles Bronson's shoes. Skarsgård does have a fantastic frostiness to his performance and it's his personality that perfectly embodies the personality of the film itself, which is resolutely Scandinavian.

Overall, In Order of Disappearance is an odd movie that is darkly comic and morbidly funny, if ultimately incidental in the end. But it is good fun while it's there, even if it's in a sick, twisted and rather wicked way.

RYAN POLLARD

★★★★★★★★★★ 7





Intrada Records will be re-releasing Craig Safan's score to the 1984 sci-fi adventure classic, **The Last Starfighter**. The score's notable for several reasons – Safan worked in the lush, symphonic mode so very popular for genre films at the time, but also managed to create an oppositional tone in his work for the Ko-Dan aliens. Intrada's reissue of their 1995 expanded soundtrack has been sourced from the original multi-track masters and is expanded even further than before. It's an epic version of a much-beloved film's score.

In a recent interview, director Josh Trank said that the score for his upcoming **Fantastic Four** reboot will be done by Philip Glass and Marco Beltrami. One thing that's absolutely guaranteed to be better than any other incarnation of the franchise, then.

La-La Land has released a slew of collections this month. There's a double disc CD of music from **The Planet of the Apes** TV series from 1974, featuring music composed by Earle Hagen and Richard LaSalle, along with the legendary Lalo Schiffrin. It's what you'd expect from any incarnation of the **Apes** saga

– pounding drums and big orchestral sweeps. There's also a 4-disc CD set of Danny Elfman's music for Tim Burton's **Batman** and **Batman Returns** movies. The music's the same as on the previous releases from La-La Land, but **Batman** has been remastered, making this worth picking up even if you already own it. Finally, there's a 4-disc set with a variety of music from **Enterprise**, the oft-maligned last television instalment of the **Star Trek** franchise. There's a disc each devoted to the music of Dennis McCarthy and Jay Chattawa, and the other two discs feature a variety of composers, including some early work from Brian Tyler (**The Expendables**, **Age of Ultron**) on the episode *Regeneration*.

Back Lot Music released the score for **The Scorpion King 4: Quest for Power**, as done by Geoff Zanelli. I have no idea why they keep making these movies. It's weird to see someone like Zanelli – whose career started off so strongly, winning an Emmy for his work on **Into the West** – scoring such a lowbrow straight-to-video movie.

One Way Static's second installment of their Static Club subscription service

closed to enrollment right before this issue came out, but we can take solace in knowing one of the label's upcoming releases. Their next announced release is another Wes Craven classic – this time, the Don Peake score to **The People Under the Stairs**, making this the third Craven film for the label, and the second score by Peake. It's supposed to be an expanded score, but details as to what that exactly means are still forthcoming.

Water Tower Music released Michael Giacchino's score for **Jupiter Ascending**, the massive space opera from the Wachowskis. The film has gotten a lot of attention, because it's the siblings' first movie from an original script since the **Matrix** trilogy completed over a decade ago. However, what should be getting more notice is the fact that composer Michael Giacchino stated last August that he recorded all of the music before the Wachowskis were done filming. It's a very Morricone-like approach to making music, and it should be interesting to see how the film is edited to Giacchino's music, rather than the other way around.

La-La Land's score for **Kingsman: The Secret Service** is out, and it's absolutely cracking. Henry Jackman and Matthew Margeson team up to create a score that is exactly what you want from a secret agent picture: lots of big brass for the action scenes, plenty of strings for the tension, and exactly the sort of fun that this picture is. It's a nice homage to the John Barry Bond scores without slavishly aping them. Had the original trailer for the film featured some of this, rather than the atrocious modern rock that lent the preview a sense of laddish idiocy.

Vinyl bootlegs of video game music seem to be the 'in' thing right now. Despite the occasional, legitimate release of video game soundtracks in the digital realm, like Sumthing Else Music Works' release of every single bit of **Mega Man** music back in November, physical product of legendary scores like **The Legend of Zelda** is nonexistent. For a fantastic glimpse at just how little video game music exists as officially licensed vinyl product, there's a Wikipedia entry that lists them all, and pretty much every single release is of a game made after 2000.

For fans of video game music of a legal variety, cover band Minibosses have released a split 10-inch vinyl EP with nerdcore rapper Mega Ran. Minibosses cover the theme to **Mega Man II**, while Mega Ran contributes

two new originals. The single comes as an edition of 250 copies, on 110-gram vinyl, available in either 'Mega Man blue' or white. Minibosses' last release was 2011's *Brass 2: Mouth*, so I was hoping to hear some new recordings, but the version of the theme on the EP is from their 2005 album, *Brass*.

Private Records imprint, Stella Edizioni Musicale, will release a double vinyl LP this month featuring all of Detto Mariano's score for **Exterminators of the Year 3000**, the absolutely barney 1983 Italian **Mad Max** rip-off. It's a limited edition of 250 on orange vinyl, and it comes with two posters and liner notes by the composer about the film's production. It's a strange synthesiser score, accurately described as "analog flatulence."

Two vinyl versions of the soundtrack to **The LEGO Movie** will be released this month. Spacelab9 has a double LP in a gatefold sleeve with liner notes from composer Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo. The double LP features all of the film's score, as well as four different versions of the Tegan and Sara cut, *Everything Is Awesome*, giving you myriad ways to get it stuck in your head yet again. It's also being released on red or yellow vinyl from Music On Vinyl, with 500 copies of each colour on 180-gram vinyl. *Everything Is Awesome* is up for Best Original Song at the Oscars, so expect demand for either of these to be rather high.

Network release the soundtrack to the seminal cult classic *The Prisoner* in May. Featuring music from Ron Grainer, Albert Elms and Wilfred Josephs, the soundtrack features new transfers from the original tape. No remastering or anything like that – I'm assuming this is just a cleaner version of the music, in preparation for this particular issuance on vinyl. It's available in a gatefold sleeve on black vinyl, or on white vinyl, limited to 1000 and 500 copies each, respectively. Based on the track titles, it appears to feature music from roughly half the episodes. It appears that *The Chimes of Big Ben*, *The Schizoid Man*, *Many Happy Returns*, and *The Girl Who Was Death* are omitted, amongst others.

Innova Records will release the score to the sci-fi film, **Ex_Machina**, by label head Geoff Barrow and composer Ben Salisbury. Intriguingly, the two have



created something different rather than just releasing the music as it is in the film, which is apparently astonishingly moody as it is. The 10-track album reconstructs the music composed and performed for the movie into something more akin to an actual album, while still trying to mirror the music as heard in **Ex_Machina** itself. Innova will release the music on LP and CD, along with bonus discs for each, featuring music not otherwise used on the album. It is also available digitally from Universal via Back Lot Music, and that's out now.

Innova also announced their Record Store Day releases, and of particular interest to readers of this column is Brian Reitzell's soundtrack to **30 Days of Night**. It's the score's first-ever vinyl release, and comes as a double LP on "blood red" 180-gram vinyl, limited to a pressing of 1000 copies. The soundtrack will be in a gatefold sleeve with a download card.

The movie's an eminently forgettable adaptation of a fantastic comic by Steve Niles and Ben Templesmith, but the score's angular electronic aspects were one of the few highlights. It has some lovely similarities to Joseph Bishara's recent work, as well as classic electro-futuristic works like **Forbidden Planet**.

Mondo had a clever tie-in for the Super Bowl in the United States. For that Sunday only, you could order variants of their new release of John Williams' score to the 1977 disaster flick, **Black Sunday**. The film notably features a plot for an attack by blimp on the Super Bowl. The variants were tri-coloured with the colours of the two competing teams: red, white and blue for the New England Patriots, and blue, silver, and green for the Seattle Seahawks. Though the chance for these limited versions of the double LP has passed, you can still snag copies on 180-gram black vinyl from Mondo's website.

And finally, we lost one of the founding members of Tangerine Dream, Edgar Froese, on January 20th. The keyboardist suffered a pulmonary embolism and died at the age of 70. Tangerine Dream's history was fraught with lineup changes throughout its history, but Froese remained a member throughout every incarnation. This includes the group's string of amazing film scores in the '80s, such as **Thief**, **Risky Business**, **Sorcerer**, and **Legend**, as well as their more recent work on the **Grand Theft Auto V** score. Froese was a titan of the electronic music game, and while he'll be deeply missed, his influence will live on in the work of those like College and M83.



BRAVE NEW WORDS

ED FORTUNE BRINGS
YOU THE LATEST
NEWS FROM
THE WORLD OF
GENRE LITERATURE



Elon Musk Honours Iain M Banks

Elon Musk, the billionaire who wants to go to Mars so badly that he's created an entire space industry to do just that, has announced that he will name his SpaceX drones after characters from Iain M. Banks' **Culture** novels. Musk is a fan of the late Scottish author's works, which are optimistic about a world in which machine intelligences exist. The billionaire owns autonomous spaceport drone ships that aid in the recovery of booster rockets. The first drone has been called 'Just Read the Instructions' in honour of the book **The Player of Games**. Other drones are currently under construction, and the next drone will be called 'Of Course I Still Love You'. This has delighted fans of Banks' work, though we hope that it will be some time before one is aptly named 'Grey Area'.

Amazon Author in Six-Figure Deal with Pan Macmillan

Publisher Pan Macmillan has acquired Blake Crouch's novel **Dark Matter**, following an auction. We understand that they paid a six-figure sum for the UK and Commonwealth rights to the novel. The plot has been described as a mix of **The Time Traveller's Wife** and **The Stand**. It's about a professor who becomes unstuck in time and loses everything, including his family. The story details his attempts at getting his life back. Sony Pictures have already optioned the film rights for \$1.25m. Crouch is mostly known for his intense and creepy thrillers. His highly popular dystopian series, **Wayward Pines**, has already been turned into a TV drama and will be on our screens later this year.

Millie Brady to Star in CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR Adaptation

Actress and model Millie Brady has been cast as the lead in the pilot of **The Clan of the Cave Bear**. The drama is an adaptation of Jean M. Auel's **Earth's Children** book series and is set in prehistoric times. The books follow the life of Ayla, a wise woman, healer and shaman. Ayla is different from her fellow cave dwellers, having been adopted into the tribe when very small. The teleplay will be written by **Maleficent**'s Linda Woolverton and the pilot will air on American cable channel Lifetime.

ATOMIC ROBO Goes Online

Brian Clevinger and Scott Wegener's excellent pulp adventure comic book **Atomic Robo** is shifting from paper and ink to an online format, adopting a model similar to Warren Ellis's **Freak Angels** and Phil Foglio's **Girl Genius**. The epic **Atomic Robo** is a time-spanning adventure series featuring Nikola Tesla's only heir: a fully sentient and highly competent robot. The entire graphic novel series is being gradually released online and it's an absolutely excellent read. The whole series will be online, free, by the summer, at which point they will launch a new ongoing volume, **Atomic Robo and the Ring of Fire**.

Hugo Awards Nominations Now Open

Nominations are now open for the Hugo Awards and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. The prestigious awards will be presented at Sasquan, the 73rd Worldcon, between August 19th-23rd in Spokane, USA. Eligible persons can submit their vote online on the official Sasquan website. The Hugo Awards are a long running, and highly recognised literary award for sci-fi novels and are organised by the World Science Fiction Society. To qualify to vote, you need to be a member (or supporting member) of the recent, current or forthcoming Worldcon. The nomination period closes March 10th at 11:59pm Pacific Daylight Time.

Luxembourg Accused Of Being Interesting

The European Commission has accused Luxembourg of using specific tax arrangement in order to provide 'state aid' to publishing giant Amazon. Long-time readers of this column will note that Amazon is no longer a stranger when it comes to controversy. The EC launched an investigation into preferential tax arrangements between Luxembourg and Amazon last year. In a document available via the EC, it said, "*Preliminary view is that the tax ruling... by Luxembourg in favour of Amazon constitutes state aid*". Amazon responded by saying, "*We are subject to the same tax laws as other companies operating here.*"

Edge Lit 4 Announced

UK-based genre literary event Edge Lit will run this year. It takes place on the 11th of July at The Quad in Derby, and will feature panels, workshops, readings and signings by the great and the good of the British book scene. Previous guests have included Sarah Pinborough, Mike Carey, Charles Stross, Joe Abercrombie and Jennifer Williams. This year's event promises to be bigger and bolder than ever. More information can be found on the Derby Quad website.

EDGE
-Lit.

COMING SOON



THE REBIRTHS OF TAO: TAO SERIES BOOK THREE

AUTHOR: WESLEY CHU
PUBLISHER: ANGRY ROBOT
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 7TH

Wesley Chu's Lives of Tao Series has been praised for its novelty and cleverness, blending superhero chic with a more traditional sci-fi style. This third book in the series picks up the action five years after the events in The Deaths of Tao. The world is on the brink of world war, as interference from the alien Prophus and Genjix races have split humanity into two radically different factions, both convinced that right is on their side. It comes down to one person, and whether they can tip the balance so all life on Earth comes out of this still breathing.



THE AFFINITIES

AUTHOR: ROBERT CHARLES WILSON
PUBLISHER: TOR BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 21ST

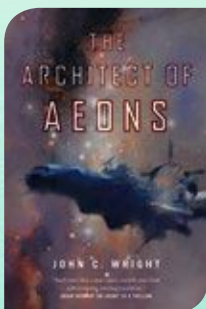
Robert Charles Wilson's The Affinities promises a fascinating view into a world in which new analytical technologies allows mankind to divide itself into utopian enclaves, called Affinities. The novel follows Adam Fish as he finds himself in amongst friends. In a society perfectly suited to his needs, he and his new friends can do amazing things, thanks to their perfect synergy with each other. Inevitably, they begin to compete with the other Affinities. Events spiral out of control; can Adam navigate the shocking changes to the world as war inevitably blooms?



THE SILVER WITCH

AUTHOR: PAULA BRACKSTON
PUBLISHER: THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 21ST

Meet Tilda Fordwell, a woman who has escaped to Wales in order to recover from the loss of a loved one, despite being haunted with visions of his final moments. Instead, valleys awake within her a dormant power, one that grants her dominion over nature, and perhaps death itself. Tilda's story mirrors that of the ancient witch Seren, who lost her Prince many lifetimes ago in the same location. Brackston weaves a tale of love and magic, split across two times. Will history repeat itself? Will Tilda ever love again, or will Seren's choices doom us all? We'll have to read it to find out.



THE ARCHITECT OF AEONS

AUTHOR: JOHN C. WRIGHT
PUBLISHER: TOR BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 21ST

John C. Wright's The Architect of Aeons is the latest in his popular time-shattering space opera. This incredible conclusion sees planet-sized intellects steer the fate of the cosmos. Set in a reality in which mankind has long since moved on to the ultimate stage of its development, this awe-inspiring space opera is a post-human epic of love, eternity and lost moments. Given the scale and style of the appropriately named Count to a Trillion series, we have our fingers crossed for a truly mind-blowing conclusion.



KING OF ASHES

AUTHOR: RAYMOND E. FEIST
PUBLISHER: HARPER COLLINS/HARPER VOYAGER
RELEASE DATE: MAY 5TH

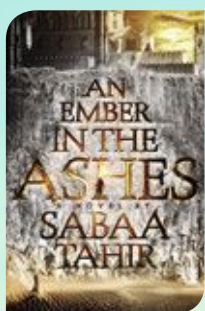
With Raymond E. Feist's Riftwar Cycle finally over, his fans have been looking forward to what he's got planned next for some time. King of Ashes is the first in his planned War of Five Crowns series. A bitter war engulfs five Greater Realms after four brother kingdoms violate an ancient Covenant. The Kingdom of Flames is ended through war, ending an ancient balance of power and throwing the land into chaos. Inspired by medieval history and Arthurian legend, King of Ashes promises to be a return to form from this epic author.



DARTH VADER AND FRIENDS

AUTHOR: JEFFREY BROWN
PUBLISHER: CHRONICLE BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 28TH

Jeffrey Brown's cutesy approach to the Star Wars franchise has proven to be a massive hit with geeks of all ages. Following on from Darth Vader™ and Son, Vader's™ Little Princess, and Goodnight Darth Vader™, his latest book expands the family to include the droids, the ewoks and much more. A heart-warming look at friendship and love in the Star Wars universe, Darth Vader™ and Friends is filled with saccharine illustrations and even sweeter sentiments. An absolute must for anyone shopping for the Star Wars fan in their life without the first clue what to get them.



AN EMBER IN THE ASHES

AUTHOR: SABAA TAHIR
PUBLISHER: RAZORBILL
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 28TH

Ancient Rome has been the inspiration for many a cracking genre novel, and Sabaa Tahir's debut novel looks set to follow this fine tradition. An Ember in the Ashes is an epic fantasy story, featuring an orphan fighting for her family and a soldier fighting for his freedom. Laia is a scholar living as a slave, who must go undercover to save her brother. Elias is the finest soldier in the academy, faced with a brutal choice, one he does not want to make. Together, they change history.



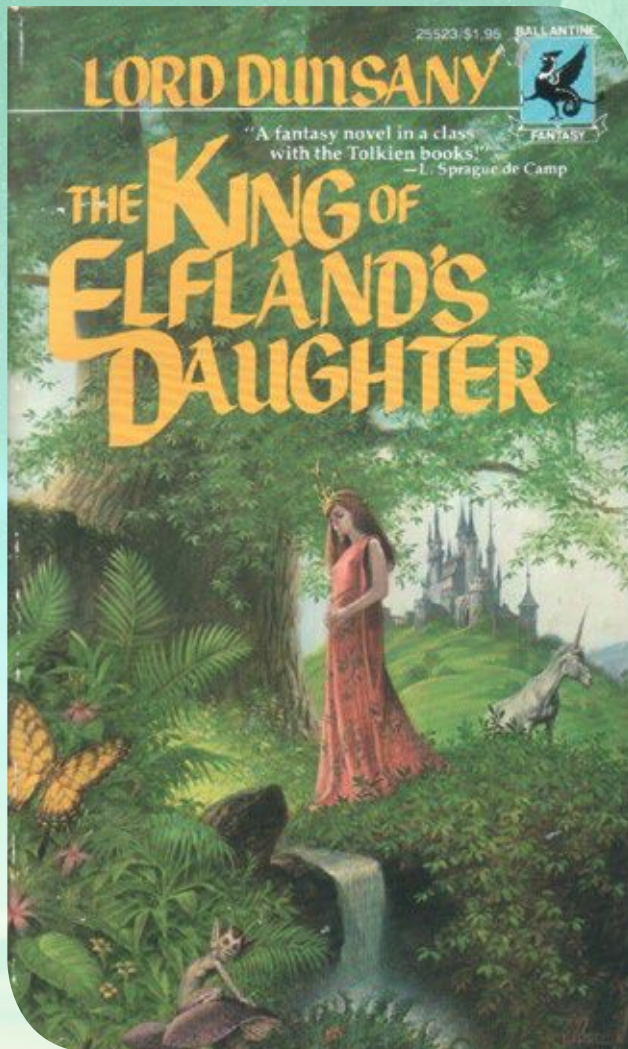
THE MACHINE AWAKES (SPIDER WAR)

AUTHOR: ADAM CHRISTOPHER
PUBLISHER: TOR BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 21ST

Adam Christopher looks like being unstoppable this year, with a host of work coming out, including his tie-in novel to TV series Elementary, and his work on the highly promising Dark Circle comic book imprint. The Machine Awakes is the second book in the Spider War series, following on from The Burning Dark. This sequel promises more of the same. High speed military sci-fi, with a healthy dose of paranoia and space opera. This time, our heroes will uncover a conspiracy that stretches from the slums of Salt City to the floating gas mines of Jupiter, one that threatens the stability of mankind.

BOOK WORMHOLE

A MONTHLY PICK
OF GENRE FICTION
BY KATE FATHERS



If you've ever wondered what happens after the fairy tale, look no further than *The King of Elfland's Daughter*...

Originally published in 1924 by Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett, the 18th Baron of Dunsany (who likely used the penname Lord Dunsany because his full name wouldn't fit on a book cover), this novel is everything you would expect from a fairy tale - but better. It begins with Alveric, who is tasked by his father with venturing into Elfland and bringing the king's daughter,

Lirazel, back to the kingdom of Erl to be Alveric's bride. He succeeds, but what happens after his quest is not quite a happily ever after, and the king of Elfland won't let his daughter go so easily.

My favourite part of this book is the use of contrast. From the onset, Dunsany highlights the differences between the human world and

Elfland: the way the forests feel and the light shines; in the creatures that inhabit the fields and the way time passes so slowly in Elfland that it's as if it hasn't passed at all; and by accentuating those differences he exposes the faults in their coexistence. The clash of cultures is typical of fairy tales, as is the human attempt to subdue the magical, and Dunsany takes this to another level by not only making this clash a physical one but a moral one as well. Lirazel doesn't just leave a physical place to marry Alveric, she leaves behind an entire way of life - a routine and a way of worshipping and an entire immortal existence - and it's a choice she struggles with as everyone around her begs her to shed her Elfish past and conform. Even the basic way Lirazel looks at the world is in direct contrast to how humans treat not just the unknown but the everyday. One of the things I love in this book is how Dunsany depicts the magic folk's interactions with the human world, the wonder, innocence and enthusiasm they have in seeing cows, dead leaves and even different grass. He sets this against humanity's wariness of the unknown and their disregard for the commonplace, and it's something we can learn from in many ways: fear and violence shouldn't be our first impression; and there is beauty and magic in everything on the Earth.

This contrast also feeds in to my second favourite part of the novel: consequences. By focusing primarily on the aftermath of the fairy tale quest, Dunsany can explore the consequences of that narrative, and he does so wonderfully. Almost from the moment they're married, Lirazel and Alveric are in conflict, a result of not only conflicting cultures but also the 'love at first sight' trope; they had only known each other a minute before Lirazel decided to run off

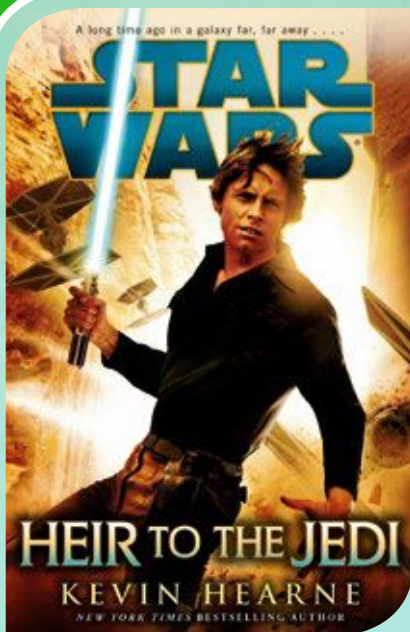
with him, and it was only a few days later that they were wed. It's a common fairy tale trope, and it's fascinating to see its flaws played out, particularly for Lirazel whose pressure to conform to her human life comes primarily from Alveric. Their marriage and what follows also have consequences for the kingdom and its residence, who asked for magic without understanding its cost. But as much as I love what Dunsany has done, there were moments where he set up destructive action only to disappoint on the consequences. I think he missed some excellent opportunities.

In addition to a compelling story, *The King of Elfland's Daughter* also has incredible prose. It has the formality of all fairy tales, is informative and light on dialogue, but it's still accessible and moving. Dunsany's turns of phrase are enchanting, and when he chooses to ruminate on ink or time, or the wonders of a field he strikes straight into your soul. The characters also follow the fairy tale model, not being overly complex and existing more to support the plot and messages than to be fully realised, relatable people. But that's okay; this is fantasy more in the style of *Idylls of the King* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; classic and focused on poetic language, although whispering of something more modern. In fact, I'd say it's the perfect bridge between those formal narratives and the fast-paced fantasy we twenty-first century readers know.

The King of Elfland's Daughter is an amazing book, and one I can't recommend enough. It's beautifully told and enthralling to read, and if you're a fan of fairy tales or fantasy it's a perfect addition to your bookshelf. Lord Dunsany also tried his hand at plays, short stories, poetry, and various genres of prose, publishing over sixty books in his lifetime. Based on this novel, they're all well worth a read.

THE LATEST RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED

REVIEWS



HEIR TO THE JEDI

AUTHOR: KEVIN HEARNE / PUBLISHER: DEL REY /
RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 26TH

This is a strange time for Star Wars fans. Freed from the baggage of the Expanded Universe and looking forward to a Lucas-free future, there's an odd vibe to the few Star Wars novels and spin-offs that are being released as we all patiently wait for The Force Awakens to hit our screens. Star Wars: Heir to the Jedi is a tale set between A New Hope and The Empire Strikes Back and details the misadventures of a young Luke Skywalker who is coming to terms with his new status as a hero of the Rebel Alliance.

The plot is pretty straightforward; Luke is sent on an errand by the Rebel Alliance to extract the Star Wars version of a computer hacker from the clutches of the Empire. He is assisted by Nakari Kelen, the heir of a biotech mogul, who not only has her own axe to grind with the Empire, but also happens to own a pretty sweet spaceship. Luke's mission is to act as both bodyguard and pilot, and to get the job done as quickly as possible.

There are some nice touches here; the hacker is part of the Givin, a mathematically-inclined species that greet each other with mathematic equations, and Nakari is interesting enough, though seems quite underused throughout the story. Luke is likeable throughout, and Hearne is clearly

very comfortable with the character and the universe he inhabits.

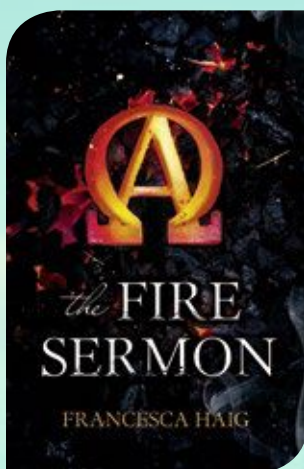
Those expecting brave new steps in the Star Wars canon might be a little disappointed, but hopefully not surprised; very little about the events of this novel put a new spin on the movies. We do get a fresh look into Luke's Jedi training. We learn more about where his lightsaber knowledge comes from and get an insight into how good he is at trying to master his Force powers without guidance.

Beyond that, there isn't much else to the novel. It's a lightly-written, enjoyable space romp with some action and some adventure. It does feel a bit video game-like in places; Luke is frequently going from point A to point B in order to pick up something necessary for his mission. Though this does make sense (the Rebel Alliance is short on resources), it also feels like padding.

Star Wars: Heir to the Jedi is a nice distraction whilst we wait for the real action to happen, but it's a very light read. It's a nice bit of space opera popcorn and quite fun, but nothing more than that.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★ 6



THE FIRE SERMON

AUTHOR: FRANCESCA HAIG / PUBLISHER: HARPER VOYAGER /
RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 26TH

'Electricity'. In the years that followed, the few survivors who were capable of bearing children always bore twins – a boy and a girl, one perfect and the other deformed. Sometimes the deformation wasn't immediately obvious but once it was finally clear which twin it was they were brutally separated – the perfect Alpha would remain with the parents, receiving a life of privilege, and the imperfect Omega would be exiled to a village that was more like a ghetto, sentenced to a harsh existence made even worse by the Alpha-class's tyranny.

Cass is one of those Omegas whose deformity is on the inside: she is a seer, a kind of psychic-empath, who is often treated with suspicion even by her own kind. But Cass has a darker secret – her Alpha brother is now one of the most feared members of the Alpha Council. As a child his name was Zach but now he is 'The Reformer', dedicated to stamping out the

Omega menace and, rumour has it, performing some cruel experiments on the side.

When Cass escapes the fortress where her brother has kept her imprisoned, she rescues an Omega boy who was one of her brother's experiments. The boy has no memory of his past, not even his name. Together they begin a dangerous journey, seeking out a mythical island where Omegas supposedly live in freedom, but even if they find it will they be as free as they hope? Cass' vicious twin and his dreaded seer-aide, The Confessor, are never far behind. Before The Fire Sermon ends, cities will fall, hundreds will die, and Cass and her companion will be forced into a collision course with the dreadful truth of who they really are.

Words like 'masterpiece' and 'instant classic' are cliché, but in the case of Francesca Haig's astounding The Fire Sermon, they're the only words to use. It's a

breath-taking, passionate, absolutely sensational work of imagination, perfectly structured, beautifully written, populated with fabulous characters (especially the young hero and heroine) and packed with intrigue, violence, compassion and underlined by a very important human message that is always present without ever becoming homily. Before starting reading, The Hunger Games-esque cover on the uncorrected publishers copy made us worried, but this isn't yet another rehash of that all-too-familiar story. The Fire Sermon is completely without equal – it leaves Hunger Games, Divergent, Twilight blah blah-yawn twitching in the dust.

Read it immediately, before the anticipated film version brands its visuals into your head. It is wonderful.

IAN WHITE

★★★★★★★★★★ 10

Several generations ago, the Blast decimated the human population, destroyed the machines and ended that legendary power source called



CROW MOON

AUTHOR: ANNA MCKERRROW
PUBLISHER: QUERCUS
RELEASE DATE: MARCH 5TH

A worldwide energy crisis – and a long-running war in Russia for any oil reserves that exist – has caused a dramatic shift in society, the creation of the Greenworld and the Redworld. In the Greenworld

villages, like the one sixteen-year-old Danny lives in, people have dedicated themselves to cleaner living and a profound respect for nature. It's effectively a pagan existence, and Danny's mother is the Head Witch of her village, who all the other villagers look to for protection and guidance.

The Redworld is what all the towns outside the Greenworld are called, forbidden places that have no power and where lawlessness reigns.

Danny isn't a witch. He's a cocky teenage boy who's more interested in impressing girls and when one of those girls asks him to steal his mother's valuable tarot cards – just for a while, just so she can look at them – and the tarot cards end up being destroyed, it launches Danny onto a journey of danger and romance, and the realisation that he has witchcraft powers of his own.

But when Danny agrees to

become a witch and learn how to develop his skills, he discovers he is strongly psychically connected to one of his teacher's previous students, a sinister Redworld gang leader called Roach who visits Danny in dreams and wants him 'to let him in' to share his power – but Roach has an even deeper agenda than that, and if he isn't stopped he will destroy everything.

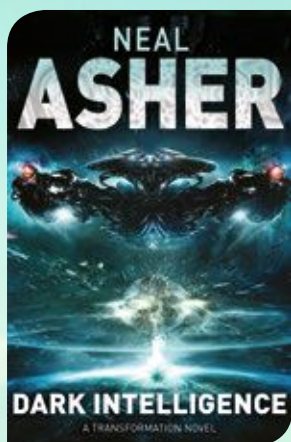
Bookshelves are packed with stories about young girls who become witches to realise their destiny so it is to Anna McKerrrow's credit that she's tried to level the playing field by making Crow Moon's trainee witch a teenage boy who, initially, only agrees to become a witch because he's got a thumping hard-on for another witch's daughter. But this 'twist' is also where Crow Moon trips over because, apart from hormonally-challenged Danny, the story is exactly like every other teenage

girl-oriented witchcraft-fantasy out there – apart from the odd comment about staring at boobs and rubbing a girl's kiss into his cheek as 'a salve for horniness' (note to author: that phrase would never enter a horny teenage boy's head – trust us, a few of us once qualified as such) Crow Moon's Danny could just as easily be another girl-destined-to-become-a-witch-destined-to-have-to-go-on-a-big-adventure.

To put it more clearly, despite her good intentions and the fact that Crow Moon is generally very well written and Anna McKerrrow has obviously done plenty of witchcraft research, she can't write in a male voice. And when that male voice is the one that's telling the story, it kills the whole idea stone dead (or stoned the crow...?) Disappointing.

IAN WHITE

★★★★★★★☆☆☆ **6**



DARK INTELLIGENCE

AUTHOR: NEAL ASHER
PUBLISHER: TOR
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Neal Asher is one of those well known sci-fi authors who has produced a whole range of novels set in the same world, known as The Polity. This makes his work a little intimidating for new readers. Luckily, his latest work, Dark Intelligence, is a good jumping-on point. It also happens to be one of his best works so far.

The titular 'dark intelligence' of the novel is Penny Royal, an Artificial Intelligence created during wartime. As such, it is a rather malevolent creation, which coupled with its god-like abilities make it a powerful force for darkness in the universe, delighting in making double-edged deals with humans, like a particularly vicious genie. We learn that Penny Royal is

looking for a better way to exist and as such has calculated an optimal path for change; one that informs much of the action throughout the novel.

The book begins with the story of Thorvald Spear, a man with burning hatred of Penny Royal due to its past sins. Thanks to his unique set of skills (and some rather nifty bio-technology), Spear seems very much the right being to bring it down, though of course things are not as easy as that. The perspective switches across to other characters as we go along, and this allows the reader to explore Asher's Polity setting. New readers will find the diverse technologies fascinating and get to discover the ruthless and rather alien

Prador for the first time. Long-time fans of Asher's work will find plenty of new twists and turns to delight in.

Asher is a modern master of sci-fi. The style is quite dense in places and Asher juggles quite a few complex ideas at times; this is a solid piece of sci-fi writing, but isn't a casual read. Commit to it, however, and you will be well rewarded for your effort.

If you feel that Iain M. Bank's Culture series is a little bit too light and jolly for your tastes and you want something with a darker, more bitter bite to it, then Asher's Polity novels may very well be for you.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★☆☆☆ **8**



ARROW: HEROES AND VILLAINS

AUTHOR: NICK AIRES
PUBLISHER: TITAN BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

At first glance, Arrow: Heroes and Villains is much like the TV series; glossy and full of beautiful people. It's packed with pictures of cast members looking suitably brooding or wryly amused, cheekbones and pouts highlighted to immaculate effect. Initially, it seems that this book is a gallery of publicity stills put together for an audience that would rather drool over their heroes than read about them, which is a shame because there's a lot more to these pages than meets the eye.

Author, Nick Aires hasn't skimmed on the text, despite the dominance of the images on show. Over fifty characters

populate this book and, while the obvious ones get more pages, none of them are short-changed. Each entry summarises their actions within the first two series of Arrow, while a neat little 'fact sheet' informs the reader of any aliases and relationships, as well as providing a brief snippet of text regarding any comic book history. It covers heroes and villains from Starling City and The Island, as well as offering an enticing glimpse into a certain Task Force X.

Arrow: Heroes and Villains does feel targeted for a specific demographic of the TV audience, so it may not be what all fans of the show are

looking for, and anyone hoping for pictures from the comics or any in-depth behind the scenes facts may find it disappointing. That said, this is a book that sets out to inform its reader of the characters populating the TV series, and it does just that in a clear, comprehensive and entertaining manner. Much like its source material, it has hidden depths for those willing to look for them, and it's a worthy introduction for anyone wanting to descend further into Oliver Queen's world.

ALISTER DAVISON

★★★★★★★☆☆☆ **7**



THE IRON GHOST

AUTHOR: JEN WILLIAMS

PUBLISHER: HEADLINE

RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 26TH

Sequels are always tricky beasts, especially sequels to critically acclaimed debut novels. Stick too close to the winning formula of the first work and there's a chance that people will get bored;

deviate too wildly and fans of the debut novel may get turned off. The Iron Ghost is the sequel to Jennifer Williams' first book, The Copper Promise, and as second books go, it does quite well in finding its own way.

The Iron Ghost picks up shortly after the events of the previous novel. Whereas book one was a neatly segmented tour of the world in which each character's story was skilfully woven together to form a single epic adventure, The Iron Ghost is one tale that mostly concentrates on the three main characters; the mage, the knight, and the thief. Having defied death and pretty much saved the world, the three friends have begun to seek out new adventures. One seemingly simple task (to steal back a MacGuffin that belonged to one

civilisation from that society's enemies) turns out to be far, far more complicated than they could ever imagine. Yet again the friends find themselves caught up in the affairs of demons and gods, with some politics and magic thrown in for good measure.

The Iron Ghost keeps a steady and frenetic pace throughout. Williams delivers raw fantasy adventure at a high speed, which is sure to keep you grinning from ear to ear throughout. The villains are nicely evil, the good guys are well intentioned but hardly perfect, and the monsters are appropriately horrible. Dark without being grim, magical without being cheesy, The Iron Ghost continues what The Copper Promise started by bringing back gravitas to

the fantasy genre without having to be depressing.

There are some elements that don't quite work; one of the subplots involves a rather drawn-out explanation of what happened to characters from the last book, and though it ends in a cool sort of way, it does overstay its welcome. The Iron Ghost also pretty much sticks to one geographical location, and though we get a lot of detail about this one region, those hoping for broader world-building will be disappointed.

Overall, The Iron Ghost is simply a cracking read and a good sign that Williams may very well be a force to be reckoned within the fantasy genre.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★★★★ 9



THOSE ABOVE

AUTHOR: DANIEL POLANSKY

PUBLISHER: HODDER & STOUGHTON

RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 26TH

Daniel Polansky is a rising star in terms of fantasy novelists. His previous series, Low Town, was a noir-style fantasy drama, concentrating on a very narrowly defined world. It's mix of crime and strangeness was both engaging and original. Those Above maintains Polansky's engaging style and storytelling, and yet is very different, being a broad and sweeping high fantasy tale in which mankind has become enslaved by the immortal and god-like Those Above.

These impossible creatures dwell at the heart of the world and control their thralls with an iron fist. Previous uprisings have been attempted, but the beings are so powerful and ancient that utter slaughter was nothing but inevitable. Instead, Mankind

bows down to these beings, fighting for the tiniest scraps of freedom and privilege.

Polansky employs a broad and sweeping approach to his narrative; the story jumps across perspectives, gently handing out tiny snippets of a vast world with a rich history and deep backstory. The pace is slow and steady throughout, with certain characters being more sympathetic and engaging than others. As the revelations are gently stacked on top of each other, the work becomes ever more compelling. This may be a slow burn, but the inevitable explosions are worth the wait.

The gutter rat Thistle is especially well thought out and entertaining, Polansky clearly warming to his preferred theme of crime and its consequences,

using the character to further build his rich and complex world. The weakest creation is the military hero Bas, who takes way too long to grab the reader. Bas makes up for this by introducing essential and necessary elements of the world.

Those Above is a clever book, shot through with clever ideas, dry humour and steady world building. It is not an uplifting book, but those looking for well-created and beautifully crafted fantasy, which also happens to be both darkly comic and devastatingly grim, will find themselves swiftly addicted. Slow it may be, but like all good things in life, worth the wait.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



IN SEARCH OF LOST DRAGONS

AUTHOR: ELIAN BLACK'MOR,

CARINE-M, JEZEQUEL

ARTIST: ELIAN BLACK'MOR,

CARINE-M

PUBLISHER: DYNAMITE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Dynamite Entertainment's beautifully illustrated, hardcover (or eBook) In Search of Lost Dragons is the English translation of a French art book - Sur La Piste Des Dragons Oublies - and has to be seen to be believed. At over 200 pages, there are countless full colour illustrations and odd steampunk/Victorian-style sketches and notes making this book truly different.

This is not a comic book, rather the journal of an illustrator documenting journeys across Europe in search of dragons of all kinds, taking in the Middle East and Saigon in a grand,

sweeping narrative. Almost every page has a breathtaking piece of art and it is not possible to pick a single favourite. The mood is maintained throughout with snippets of journal, odd notes, newspaper clippings and other odds and ends.

The book is not afraid to name its influences and there are name checks for (of course) Jules Verne as well as Tolkien. There are numerous maps showing where the dragons live or were encountered, botanist's notes and sketches of rare plants and endless details that almost leave the reader believing in the veracity of the book and its

invisible narrator's journey. There is even much to be learned - who knew that a Jenny Haniver was a grotesquely preserved carcass of a ray or skate, altered to appear like a preserved mermaid, and also the name of a flying ship in the Mortal Engines series? This is a book to savour, enjoy and contemplate. It is very hard to do justice to something so visually appealing with mere words. If you even vaguely think this might be of interest, get it - you won't be disappointed.

TONY JONES

★★★★★★★★★★ 10



INTERVIEW - DANIEL POLANSKY

Brooklyn-based DANIEL POLANSKY is best known for his steampunk noir *LOW TOWN* novels. His latest work, *THOSE ABOVE*, the first part of a fantasy duology that will form *THE EMPTY THRONE* series. We caught up with this exciting author to find out more about his work...

STARBURST: What is *Those Above* about?

Daniel Polansky: *Those Above* is part one of a two-part fantasy series that deals with this race of quasi-superhuman beings that have subjugated humanity who live in this city in the centre of the world and the attempts of their various human slaves to win their freedom.

How different is your latest work from the *Low Town* novels?

I think it's significantly different. You tend to see things differently as a writer than maybe a reader would. The *Low Town* stuff is first-person and it is very crime orientated. It all takes place over the course of a couple of days. *Those Above* is much bigger; it's about more historic events. The style is very different, more flowery and less noir-centred. I didn't really intend to write something so different but books develop in a weird way. Looking at it now, I really think that it's very different from any of the stuff that I have written so far.

Your *Low Town* series is gloriously gloomy. Would those attracted to those books get a similar buzz from *Those Above*?

I think so. *Low Town* is very dark in a certain kind of way; it's got that griminess and criminality to it. I think *Those Above* is packed with a sort of grim view of humanity generally. *Those Above* is a bigger novel. It's very dark in a broader scale. There's more characters and more viewpoints, with a wider range of settings. At the same time, I'm the same writer so if you liked *Low Town*, you'll like *Those Above*.

What are your influences?

It depends on what you're working on. I'm a big history buff and the idea for *Those Above* came from a lot of different periods in history. A year or two ago, I read extensively on the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, and it was a very interesting thing to think about. Especially the decay of a civilisation, and the different sorts of cultures that make it. There are a lot of different pieces to *Those Above*, history is a big part of it.

Why is so much fantasy grim and so dark?

I honestly can't give you a reason for that. They tend to have a grim perspective on the world so my writing reflects that but I'm really not sure why grim-dark or whatever terminology you want to use has gained such a wide readership in recent years. Maybe it's a reaction to the state of the world, but I honestly really don't know.

Will you be expanding the world of *Those Above* in future novels?

Those Above is scheduled to be two books, it's a duology. I tend to think of settings that I design in service to some specific theme or plot. *Those Above* is about the decay of a society and a few other things. I created it essentially to ask certain questions and by the end of these two books, we'll have certain answers to the degree that I am capable of. I'm don't think I'm going to explore it further than that. For me, a lot of the fun is coming up with new stuff. Going back and playing in the same sandbox doesn't have the same sort of appeal for me, if I am honest.

What's the next big project that you have lined up?

Oh gosh! Right now, I have my nose to the grindstone on the sequel to *Those Above*. I'm always the kind of guy who has a lot of plates spinning. I have this draft of a contemporary fantasy satire thing that's currently with my editor, hopefully they'll like it. A lot of it is to do with what your publishers are interested in putting forward.

Is there any franchise or world that you'd love to write for?

Interesting... I've really never thought about it! Off the top of my head, I'd love to write *Lankhmar* stuff, I really like Fritz Leiber. But I think I'd rather be doing my own thing.

Is there a difference between US and UK fantasy writing?

I don't think there is one. Nothing jumps to mind, there's a lot of overlap at this point. There were bigger distinctions 30, 40 and 50 years ago, but now we have this free flow of ideas so I don't think we are limited by national boundaries.

What tips do you have for fantasy writers?

Keep your day job! Also, you have to read a tonne. I think a lot of people who dream about writing skip that critical step. Regardless of what genre you're in, you have to read outside that genre. You never know where a new idea will come from. *Those Above* came from reading history. If you want to be a serious writer of any kind, you're going to spend a lot of time with your nose in a book.

What one book do you wish you had written?

Just one? There are so many books that I had wish I had written! I wish I had written *Red Harvest* by Dashiell Hammett, it's a great work of American noir. There's something almost mystical to it. It's an extraordinary book. It's inspired whole strands of American crime fiction, it really is a masterpiece.

WORDS: ED FORTUNE

You can read the review of DANIEL POLANSKY's *THOSE ABOVE* on page 105 and the book is on sale from February 26th, published by Hodder & Stoughton.

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**GHOST
STORIES**

15

BY JEREMY DYSON AND ANDY NYMAN

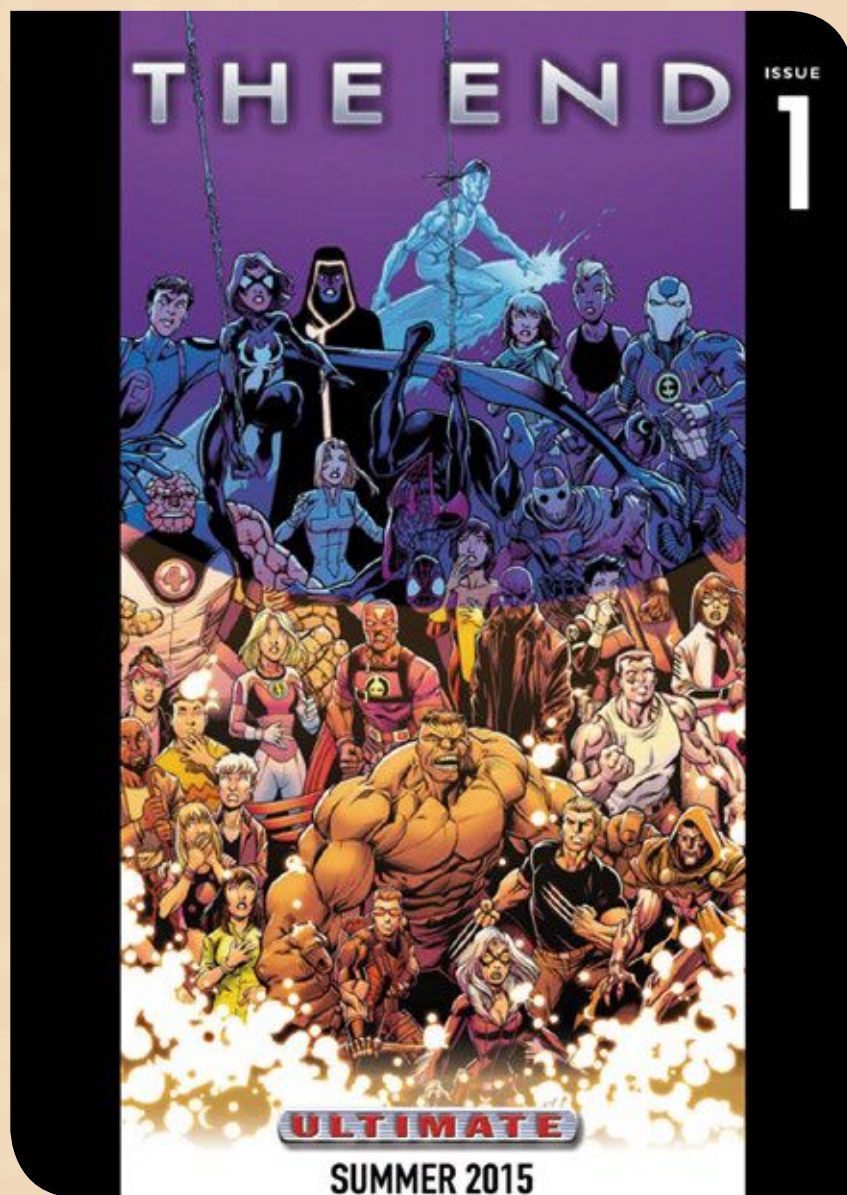
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 **LEICESTER SQUARE**

VIEW FROM THE WATCHTOWER

JOEL HARLEY PULLS
MONITOR DUTY
TO BRING YOU THE
LATEST FROM
THE WORLD OF
COMIC BOOKS



The Marvel Universe is ending. Over. Kaput. Wait, what? Now that I've got your attention, we delve straight in at the deep end of this month's comic book news. It doesn't get any bigger than the end of Marvel Comics as we know it. Well, sort of. That is, of course, hyperbole, completely befitting a company helmed (give or take) by Stan Lee, hyperbole and superlative supreme. What I actually refer to is the nature of Marvel's seemingly long-gestating *Secret Wars*. The event will smash together the Marvel Universe

proper and the Ultimate Universe in an enormous crossover that will end all comics as we know them...

Except no, not really. Pieces of each fragmented world will form their own *Battleworld* in which opposing realities will fight for supremacy. What does this mean for post-*Secret Wars* Marvel? Marvel Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso told audiences at a press event: "We are taking the best and biggest pieces of Marvel history and seeing how easily they coexist with each other." Like the

New 52, then, except with more Miles Morales and (potentially) Gwen Stacy, alive and well. Ultimate Spider-Man Miles should feel honoured then – the whole thing coming across as an excuse to shoehorn the young fellow into the Marvel Universe proper. Well, that's where all the action is at, to be fair – the Ultimate Universe hasn't been quite the same since Reed Richards turned evil, almost everyone in it died and Mark Millar was put in charge of writing Captain America.

Keep an eye out for more news on *Battleworld* or *Secret Wars* – or whatever they decide to call it next – as I get it. If we really do lose one of the Big Two (we won't) you'll be the first to know. But I wouldn't worry too much about it; Marvel Comics are going nowhere...

Hey, remember that time Superman got electric powers and a new costume? Yeah, that's right – it was terrible. Hopefully, DC will have better luck this time around, as Geoff Johns and John Romita Jr. give the Man of Steel a brand new power and a costume upgrade in *Superman* #38. Details remain sparse on the specifics of the power except that it's: "The most destructive power Superman has". Johns went on to say that, "It's something that is going to be very unstable and something that Superman's going to have to deal with for quite a while." Much like that mullet he had, eh? At the time of going to print, readers are just finding out the nature of that power. Reception has been mixed, to say the least.

You may remember this writer voicing excitement at the announcement of Romita's appointment on *Superman*. You find me now eating my words at the, honestly, underwhelming artwork. It's a kick seeing the Marvel giant drawing Batman and Superman, but he tends to make Clark look around the same age as *Kick-Ass*'s teenage Dave. His costume upgrade showed a slightly modified collar, yellow belt buckle and, um, fingerless gloves. No red underpants, then. Keep an eye out for *Superman: Convergence* (Dan Jurgens and Lee Weeks) which sees the (perhaps temporary) return of red-pantsed Superman, complete with marriage to Lois Lane. Will he become a permanent fixture again? Jurgens was typically sketchy about the matter. We can but hope.

Continuing with the controversial character changes, personal favourite *Batman* writer Scott Snyder has thrown a long-standing dynamic for a loop with a revelation no one can have seen coming.



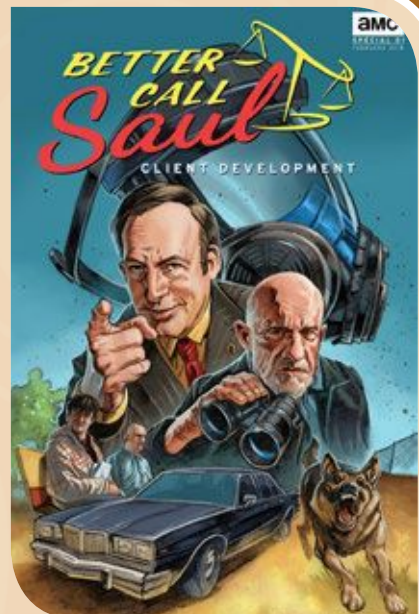
Without going into too spoilery territory, it continues recent Batman vs. Joker developments by delving deep into the origins of the latter. No, deeper than that. As it should be with the character, much of it is left deliberately vague, but what Snyder has done here is either genius or madness. Like the Joker himself, come to think of it. Honestly, I don't know how to feel about this. Expect it to be ignored or retconned away in due course. The changes are set to continue long after *Convergence* (yes, that again – DC's very own *Battleworld* or *Secret Wars* or whatever you might want to call it) with Snyder promising something 'no one has done in 75 years of Batman.' Colour me intrigued. And/or outraged, depending.

What you may have taken away from this month's news so far, then, is that we're in a time of turmoil, during which



both big houses are looking into their past for inspiration, smashing together multiverses, resurrecting characters and (scoffs) ending comics as we know them. No, really, they are. But in non-event related news, there's still plenty to enjoy should you look hard enough. Aunt May and Gwen Stacy, for example, donning Spidey outfits for *Spider-Verse* (okay, maybe we're not quite done with the events yet), Swamp Thing coming to *Injustice* and Batman getting super powers of his own. *Black Vortex*, meanwhile, will see the Guardians of the Galaxy meet the X-Men in an event you won't see on the big screen anytime soon. Not unless Fox lets up, which is unlikely as long as Jackman and chums are raking it in.

Pick up Marvel's one-shot digital comic *Age of Ultron Prelude – The*



Scepter'd Isle to find out how the MCU plans on getting around its 'no more mutants' rule in order to include Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch in their *Avengers* sequel, by the way. In it, we pick up from the closing scenes of *Winter Soldier*, where Hydra agents prod and poke at test subjects with Loki's sceptre – most notably, a certain Pietro and Wanda, latent Inhumans that they are.

Outside of the Big Two, and back to Scott Snyder – away from the confines of the DC Universe this time. His creator-owned title *American Vampire* is heading off into space. It's something of a cliché to send your horror villain into space (see Jason and Leprechaun) when you run out of ideas, but Snyder has more than proven himself not averse to taking risks (see those Batman/Joker revelations, for better or worse) and this at least makes sense, being set in the midst of the Cold War and all.

Finally, this month sees the release of a short online comic book tying in with AMC's highly anticipated *Breaking Bad* spin-off/prequel *Better Call Saul*. Illustrated by artist Steve Ellis, *Client Development* is set during the Season Two episode of *Breaking Bad* which introduced our anti-hero to dodgy attorney Saul Goodman. Slight but amusing, it certainly captures Mike Ehrmantraut's grizzled look, and should follow him as he uncovers 'Heisenberg's' identity for employer Saul. *Client Development* is written by TV series staff Jenn Carroll and Gordon Smith. Comics, bitch!

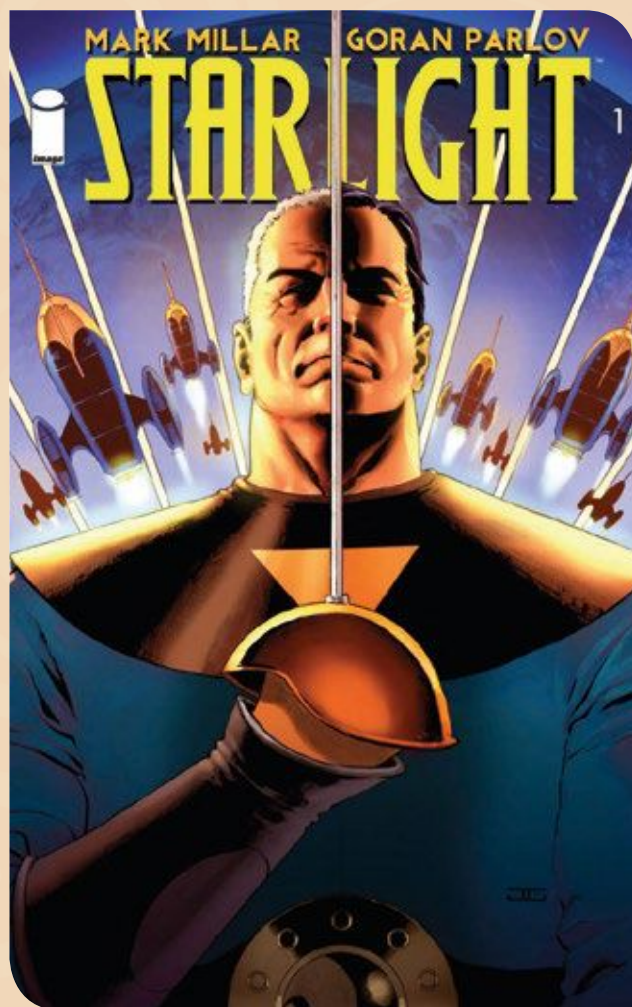
Provided there's anything left to report on, I'll be back next month with more Earth-shattering revelations and shocking developments. That's if, you know, comics still exist. (Which, of course, they totally will.)

Joel Harley can be contacted at:
joel.harley@starburstmagazine.com
 and tweeted @joelharley



REVIEWS

THE LATEST COMIC
BOOK RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED



STARLIGHT VOL. 1

WRITER: MARK MILLAR / ARTIST: GORAN PARLOV / PUBLISHER: IMAGE COMICS / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 24TH

Starlight is the latest effort from comic book royalty Mark Millar, who this time teams up with Goran Parlov to deliver a delightful space adventure focussed on a one-time hero. Millar is best known for his work on the likes of Superman: Red Son, Marvel's Civil War, and for co-creating titles like Kick-Ass, Wanted, and The Secret Service. And it has to be said, Starlight is up there with the best of those titles.

The story focusses on the wonderfully-named Duke McQueen, who once upon a time was an intergalactic hero who saved an alien race. Thing is, nobody believes Duke's jaunt to a world far, far away actually happened. 40 years after his hero days, the elderly Duke is a widow whose kids are grown up and seemingly always have something better to do than spend some time with their dear old dad. He's given up on telling people about his otherworldly adventures as he's an object of mockery in the local community, leaving Duke as just existing



from day to day with nothing to hold on to. When a young boy from the world he saved turns up in the present day in desperate need of the legendary Duke McQueen's help, the old man ends up in the middle of one last adventure.

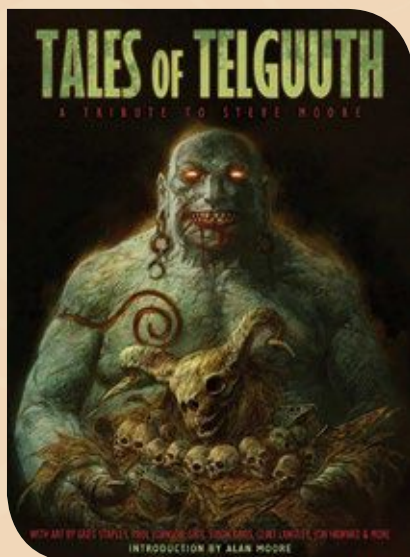
Make no mistake about it, Starlight is a wonderful, heart-warming book that is beautifully crafted and elegantly illustrated. It's delivered with a certain romanticism, which fans of some of Millar's grittier work may not be expecting. But it works. It really, really works. Yes, it's a little cheesy at times but that kind of feels like some of the point of the book and takes nothing away from the joy of the adventure.

Starlight is a genuine feel-good story about a forgotten old man who gets one more day in the sun. There're elements of Star Wars, Flash Gordon, James Bond, and dialogue that seems as if it's been written purposely for Kurt Russell to devour, and it's great to see this intergalactic adventure and all of its twists and turns unravel from page to page.

The storytelling is delicate yet impactful, the art similarly subtle but powerful, and the overall package makes for an engaging and enjoyable old-fashioned adventure. Yes, comics are often gripping and heralded when drenched in realism and the dirtier aspects of life, but sometimes it's just fun to throw yourself into something that's simply a fun journey of one hero reliving his glory days and having one more chance at doing something spectacular.

ANDREW POLLARD

★★★★★★★★★ 9



TALES OF TELGUUTH: A TRIBUTE TO STEVE MOORE

WRITER: STEVE MOORE / ARTIST: VARIOUS
/ PUBLISHER: 2000 AD / RELEASE DATE:
MARCH 12TH

Telguuth: a planet of perverse wonders lost amidst the whirling suns of the galactic hub. So precedes Steve Moore's Tales of Telguuth, a collection of short, sharp comic book shocks H.P. Lovecraft himself would have been impressed by. George

R.R. Martin too, if the medieval cruelty on display is anything to go by.

Released to commemorate Moore's passing last year, 2000 AD has published this collection of his fantasy series, paying tribute to one of British comics' most distinctive voices. The format will be familiar to fans of Tharg's Future Shocks (the first of which was written by Moore himself) – short and self-contained, usually with a humorously bleak or ironic ending, thick with fantastic imagery that'll stick around in one's memory for a long time afterwards. Some of Moore's Telguuth-set Future Shocks are included here, as well as everything else developed for 2000 AD on the planet. In addition to the shorter stories, there are a few longer ones too; these don't always work quite so well, but the lengthier stay is appreciated. Sumptuously illustrated by a veritable who's who of British 2000 AD talent – from Greg Staples to Paul Johnson (who's work fits the stories best) – it's a fantastic collection with some great world building at play. Talking Heads, Music of the Spheres and To Become a God are perhaps the book's best, although there's so much here that it's hard to pin down a top five. The last few stories are perhaps the weakest, although that's more of an issue with the newer art than it is the writing. One of Moore's classic Future Shocks is also included, giving the book its closest thing to a belly-laugh moment.

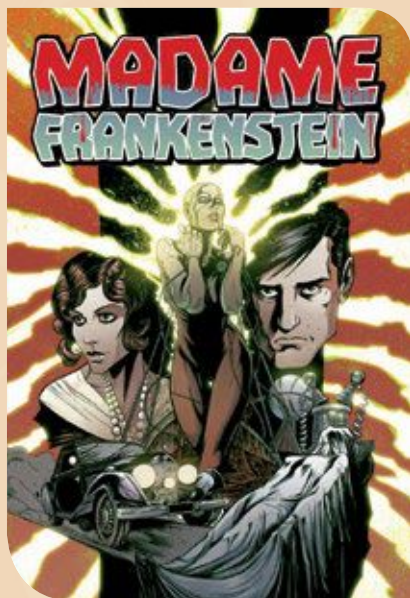
Accompanied by an affectionate

foreword by comics legend Alan Moore (no relation), Tales of Telguuth is a beautiful and lively collection of stories which does a great job of paying tribute to its writer. It's a bittersweet read, then, but one of the best fans of horror, fantasy, comics or 2000 AD will ever get. That Alan Moore loves Telguuth should tell(guuth) readers all they need to know about the place.

At once terrifying, hilarious and memorable, Tales of Telguuth will give you even more nightmares than eating rats' testicles before bed.

JOEL HARLEY

★★★★★★★★★ 9



MADAME FRANKENSTEIN

WRITER: JAMIE S. RICH / ARTIST: MEGAN LEVENS
/ PUBLISHER: IMAGE COMICS / RELEASE DATE:
MARCH 10TH

Taking its inspiration from the well-known and often visited theme of man's quest to control life (and death), Madame Frankenstein is a stylish new comic book series from Jamie S. Rich and Megan Levens.

Doctor Vincent Krall has embarked upon a quest to create a woman from the remains of a friend who was the unfortunate recipient of his unrequited idolisation. Partly through professional vanity and partly through misguided adoration, Krall initially cares little for the consequences of his actions until events begin to spiral way out of his control and he is forced to face reality.

There is no doubt that Madame Frankenstein is a complex book, with many layers of complicated motivation besetting its main characters, but there is perhaps a little too much information being forced upon the reader for the format. Absorbing several editions of the comic in one sitting provides the most enjoyable experience as Rich delves into the psychological forces that drive his creations. The downside is the development of such a detailed backstory feels slightly rushed, as if there is an urgency to extol as much information as quickly as possible. More patience and subtlety leading to greater intrigue may have generated a more tense and involved reading experience.

In having chosen a stark, black and white palette, Levens brings a cold, chilly feel to the page which reflects the dark central story. There is a classical elegance to many of the panels that surreptitiously holds the eye for longer than necessary, leaving a strong imprint on the memory. This however only emphasises the occasions when the page becomes a

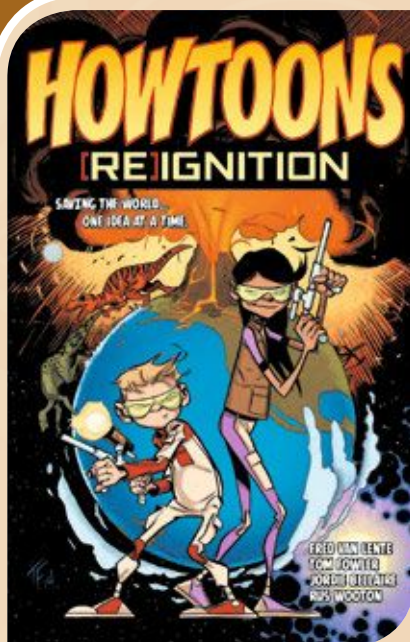
little too fussy, the artist working hard to incorporate the brisk plot.

There is no doubt that Madame Frankenstein is an impressive piece of work but how long it can sustain the main story remains to be seen. If Rich has enough ideas to push the narrative forward, and with Levens' striking artwork giving it life, this could quickly become essential reading. If not then it may just turn into a missed opportunity.

JOHN TOWNSEND

★★★★★★★★★ 7





HOWTOONS: [RE]IGNITION VOLUME 1

WRITER: FRED VAN LENTE / ARTIST: TOM FOWLER,
JORDIE BELLAIRE / PUBLISHER: IMAGE / RELEASE
DATE: MARCH 10TH

Greenhouse gases have swamped the Earth so our friends at Dinosaur Energy

are about to implement a spectacular solution: blowing up nukes inside a volcano's crater so that the resulting dust and ash will block the sun's rays and slow down global warming.

Tuck and Celine's parents are scientists. They know what's about to happen is a bad idea and they're going to try and stop it, but first they make sure that Tuck and Celine are safe in the underground bunker, being supervised by their computer nanny... err... N.A.N.N.I.

Celine plugs herself into the Dreamschool module so at least she can learn something while she's sleeping. Tuck plays zombie videogames. When they wake up to find their parents haven't returned and that Dinosaur Energy's 'solution' has turned the Earth into a seemingly unpopulated lush green wilderness, they set out on a journey to find Mom and Dad for themselves. But this is no ordinary quest and they're going to learn a lot of new things before they reach the end. In fact, we all will.

You know when you pick up a book and find yourself screaming, "This is brilliant! Why didn't I think of it?" Well, a lot of people are going to be screaming exactly that when they pick up Howtoons. This book is absolute genius but, like all the best genius ideas, the premise behind it is deceptively simple.

Howtoons: [Re]Ignition is an educational comic book adventure that teaches us some pretty hardcore

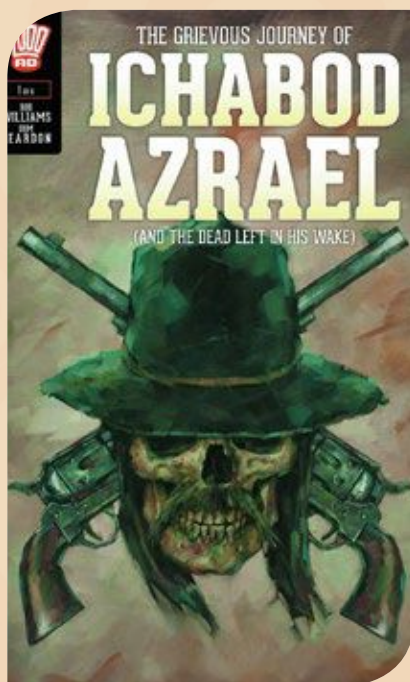
science (and is packed with a load of very cool projects to make-and-do) while it simultaneously keeps us entertained with a really smart, exciting, story. We find out about energy in all its forms – even how to get power from a potato or a peanut! – we learn how to make a go-kart, a homemade flashlight, and a submarine out of a water bottle (among many other experiments), and on the way we pick up hints about Morse code, encounter a tribe of orphans who zoom through the jungle on zip-lines and make a stomp rocket to defeat robot dinosaurs with.

Tuck and Celine, the hilariously bickering brother-and-sister double act, are brilliant guides; constantly trying to get the better of one another, escaping each dangerous scrape just in time to fall into a new one, but always there for each other no matter what happens. Tom Fowler's artwork is gorgeous, Fred Van Lente's writing is sharp-witted and incredibly clever (how they managed to incorporate the science so effortlessly into the story, without oversimplifying or making it too complicated, is remarkable) and anyone who picks this up, regardless of age, is going to love it.

We can't recommend Howtoons highly enough.

IAN WHITE

★★★★★★★★★★10



THE GRIEVOUS JOURNEY OF ICHABOD AZRAEL (AND THE DEAD LEFT IN HIS WAKE) #1

WRITER: ROB WILLIAMS / ARTIST: DOM
REARDON, PETER DOHERTY / PUBLISHER:
REBELLION / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 25TH

After being responsible for a few too many funerals, murderous gunfighter Ichabod is ambushed by a posse of hitmen and finally slain; soon after, he finds himself lost in purgatory and washed up by the River Styx. Ichabod is not the kind of man to just accept this, and upon discovering he somehow has the unnatural power to slay creatures of the underworld, he vows to fight his way out and return to the world of the living and the woman who loves him.

"His name is Ichabod and he was a killer." As opening lines go, it would be hard to get more succinct than that. Although the idea of the grizzled gunslinging badass is practically an archetype in itself, in this character – combined with a Land of the Dead setting, and guns with infinite ammo that can kill anything – there are more than faint echoes of the origin story of the Saint of Killers from Garth Ennis' Preacher; an intentional amalgamation of the attributes applied to the collective memory of every antihero from tales of the Old West. However, the seeds of Ichabod's growth into his own distinct character are planted, even if he's a little thinly-drawn at this stage.

The fact that not even the demons and angels Ichabod initially encounters know the source of his supernatural death-dealing means something momentous is going on, and the issue of exactly who (or indeed what) he truly is will likely be the comic's cornerstone

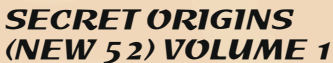
mystery. An unnamed narrator relates the plot as though Ichabod's story were a campfire tale passed down the decades with the accuracy of events blurring into myth with each retelling, while aspects where details are in dispute are juxtaposed with panels conveying the truth. Although Rob Williams' prose utilises an extensive vocabulary (or judicious use of a thesaurus), the overcomplicated sentences sometimes strain the credence of the verbal narrative. Sesquipedalian Loquaciousness does not necessarily equate to elegance.

The artwork shifts into stark black and white when Ichabod reaches the underworld wasteland, creating a desolate void appropriately empty of anything distinct or lifelike, contrasting beautifully with the endless azure sky and scorched bronze desert of the world he was torn from, especially at the points where events run parallel between the two worlds, colour appearing and vanishing from one panel to the next.

It's an intriguing start to the story, if presented a little matter-of-factly, but as the series progresses and the story expands and deepens, the mix of western, fantasy, horror, and possibly even romance should create something unique and compelling.

ANDREW MARSHALL

★★★★★★★★★★7



Secret Origins is one of DC's long-running anthology titles that served to give new readers (and curious fans) an easy way to find out about the wide variety of heroes in the DC Universe. Thanks to the recent continuity reboot, this means we can yet again start at the beginning. Again.

Despite these stories being slightly fresher, they're hardly original and barely do the job. The highlight is Harley Quinn, and though it's nice to see a version of Harley in which she isn't a victim, it still pulls its punches way too much. If it was a little bit more daring, it would have been remarkable, but alas it's just a touch too timid. It feels as if there is a definite corporate line when it comes to the New 52, and anything remotely original or clever simply isn't allowed.

superheroes. It's a real shame, because when the individual artists get a chance to showcase their skills, the results are amazing. Sadly, *Secret Origins* doesn't even have any such showboating, making the whole thing look quite bland. The book is frustratingly one step away from being something special all the way through.

ED FORTUNE



There are essentially two versions of the Teen Titans; the junior Justice League version that appears in the comic books,

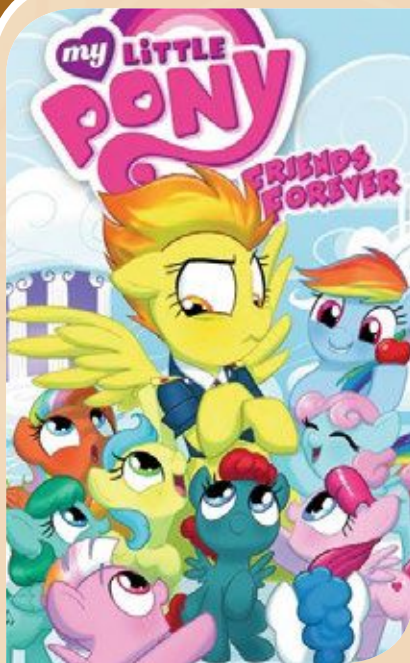
Frankly, this version of the Teen Titans far surpasses the overly glum, hyper serious DC52 version so much that it isn't even fair to compare them. True, Teen Titans Go! Volume 1: Party, Party! lacks a plot, storyline or anything beyond the simplest characterisation, but it's laugh out loud funny, intensely charming and rather clever.

There are some truly staggering (and cleverly adult) jokes throughout this book, one of which will have a certain sort of comedy connoisseur in stitches. All the usual clichés of teenage life are there, including too much junk food, badly judged dates, and slumber parties. Each story is essentially a series of

Fans of grim, dark violence should stay away. Everyone else should join in on the party.

ED FORTUNE





**MY LITTLE PONY:
FRIENDS FOREVER – VOL 3**
WRITER: VARIOUS / ARTIST: VARIOUS /
PUBLISHER: IDW / RELEASE DATE: MARCH 24TH

My Little Ponies are back, although if you've got children of a certain age you'll probably know they never left. Those

colourful little mini-broncos have come a long way since their early toy store days, and if this third volume of My Little Pony: Friends Forever is anything to go by, they're still continuing their whinnying formula. (Sorry).

In this fantastic four-story collection, the Ponies trot along to Apple Con where Granny is upset to discover the Flim Flam Brothers are back and apparently up to their old tricks. But when Granny sets out to teach those shady Flim Flams a lesson, the result isn't what any of them expected...

When Fluttershy tries to help Iron Will discover his 'inner pony', she ends up giving him some unexpected relationship advice and finds out the bad-tempered Minotaur is pretty good in the kitchen...

Rainbow Dash is given a secret mission by Spitfire and is suddenly up to her hooves in trouble, teaching some troublesome fillies how to fly and learning that sometimes even heroes aren't perfect...

And, finally, it's the annual snack cart invasion and sweet-toothed Pinkie urgently needs Twilight's help to kick her phenomenon habit because last year, after she indulged in all that yummy deliciousness, something really embarrassing happened. The problem is, Pinkie's already jonesing for a 'nomms feast' and Twilight soon finds out that keeping a hyper-addicted pony from

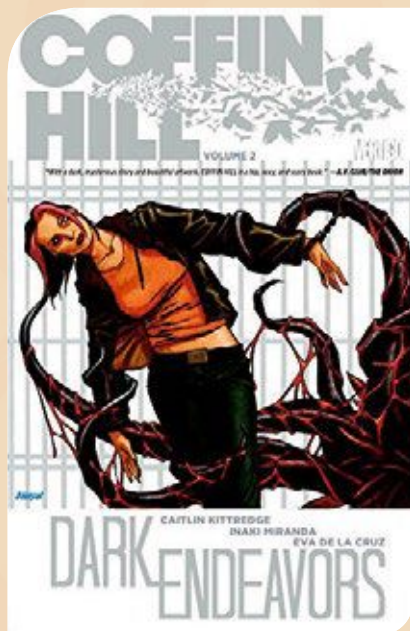
her pastries is more challenging than it sounds.

Up until a couple of weeks ago, when a certain seven-year-old family friend came to visit, hijacked this writer's computer and gave me a My Little Pony crash-course (yep, this is all your fault Bethany), I was a real neigh-sayer. As a kid in the late 1970s, I wanted a tauntaun for my Luke Skywalker doll to ride on and when my parents came back with a My Little Pony, because the tauntauns had all sold out, it was a traumatising moment that still brings me and a certain plastic Jedi out in a cold sweat.

But now that's all changed. My Little Pony: Friends Forever is terrific, fast and funny, beautifully written and illustrated, brimming with irresistible imagination and packed with enough gags and goodwill that kids and even the most a-hoof adults will enjoy it (sorry... again...). So what that every story contains some kind of life message that's delivered about as subtly as being smacked around the head by a giant sugar lump. This quartet of tails are more moreish than a mountain of Pinkie's phenomenons (by far my favourite story of the herd) and that's coming straight from the horse's mouth. Get it before it gallops off the shelves.

IAN WHITE

★★★★★★★★★★10



**COFFIN HILL VOLUME 2:
DARK ENDEAVOURS**

WRITER: CAITLIN KITTREDGE / ARTIST: INAKI MIRANDA / PUBLISHER: VERTIGO / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 24TH

When Vertigo cancelled its long-running supernatural detective comic Hellblazer in 2013, it was obvious that they were already planning to fill the gap. Horror stories are

one of the mainstays of the comic book world, and the Vertigo label is well placed to promote mature and intelligent tales of the supernatural. Coffin Hill is an attempt to fill in the gap left by Hellblazer and so far, it's been a bit of a disappointment.

A sleepy New England town is the home of the Coffin family, reputed to be a coven of witches. Our main protagonist is Eve Coffin, a young lady with spooky powers who is well aware that if she doesn't use them wisely, she'll end up going utterly crazy. To this end, she joins the police force and almost straight away finds herself working a case that involves supernatural-themed serial killings. The plot skips backwards and forwards in time to give us a perspective as to exactly how bad Eve's life is. Unfortunately, rather than creating a clever and interwoven narrative what we have is a rather confusing mess. When we delve into the mess, all we find is a series of clichés with little substance.

Inaki Miranda's artwork doesn't help. It's all well and good that the Coffins are a family of pretty ladies but when they all look so similar that you have to do a mental double take to work out what is happening next, then that's not good. It's a real shame because the art itself is appropriately atmospheric and very pretty, if a little samey.

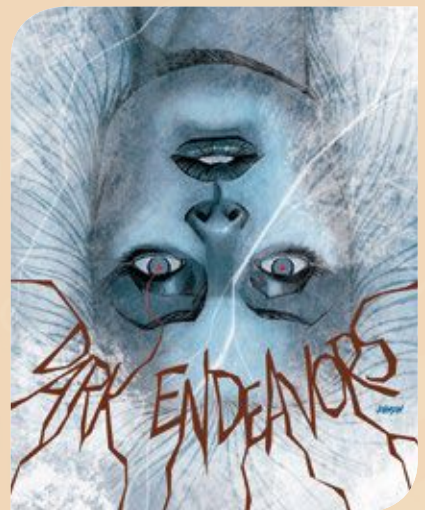
There are sparks of a really good series here; the whole thing is framed like a TV series and we get a good handle on the action throughout. The world that Kittredge is establishing is an interesting one; it's

simply that there is too much going on too early on. This is the second volume in a series and those who have not read the first book will be utterly lost. Which is fairly lazy; Coffin Hill has not grown so complex that a jumping on point is not possible; it's simply that one wasn't written into the tale.

Behind the mess is a solid murder mystery story and with any luck, the series will be able to untangle itself and be more engaging by Volume 3.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★★★★5





STAR SLAMMERS: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

WRITER & ARTIST: WALTER SIMONSON /
PUBLISHER: IDW / RELEASE DATE: FEBRUARY 17TH

When Walt Simonson's *Star Slammers* made its debut in the '70s, it was groundbreaking stuff. Even back in the early '80s,

when Marvel released it as part of its graphic novel collection, it stood out due to its excellent art and its cinematic sci-fi violence. Alas, in the year 2015, its power to impress has long since faded. What was once incredible stuff is now our minimum expectation of science fiction comic books.

It doesn't help that the core premise is very, very simple and rather dumb. The *Star Slammers* are a race of intergalactic mercenaries who can out-shoot, out-fight and out-think anybody. This race of superhuman killing machines are in high demand and are regarded as an immense threat to anyone who can't afford them.

The story swaggers around like the hero of an '80s action movie. There isn't a lot of complexity here, and the plot is paper thin. *Star Slammers* turn up, shout a bit and then violence happens. The first story (which gives us their origin) is the better tale and has some attempt at depth. The second tale is longer, dumber and less coherent, but it does feature a ton of scantily-clad ladies (for very little discernible reason) and a female lead who seems to be made solely out of clichés.

As a demonstration of Simonson's talent, it's a very interesting showcase of one of the industry's most enduring and endearing figures. As a piece of comics history, it's a fascinating lesson in the evolution of both comics storytelling and how far we've come in terms of conveying action and depth. As an actual comic book, intended for an evening's entertainment,

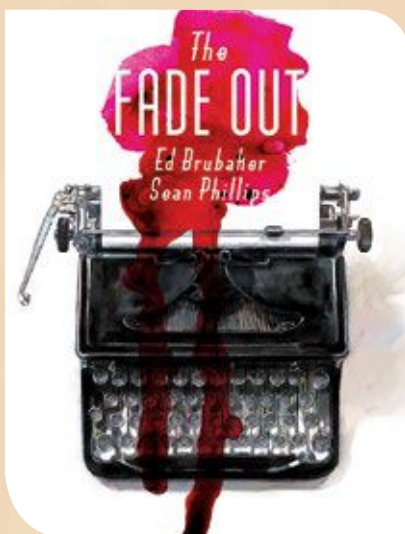
it's total trash. Very competently produced and pretty trash, but pulp nonsense none the less.

It is a very good thing that IDW have resurrected this book and made it more easily available; if you're into comics history, or you're an artist looking to examine the art style of a master of the industry, you'll find this very useful. If you're just after a fun bit of sci-fi, however, comic books have moved on since *Star Slammers*, and there is better stuff out there.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★

5



THE FADE OUT - VOL 1

WRITER: ED BRUBAKER / ARTIST: SEAN PHILLIPS / PUBLISHER: IMAGE COMICS /
RELEASE DATE: MARCH 10TH

Los Angeles, 1948. A fully-clothed screenwriter wakes up in a strange bathtub after a night on the sauce. He doesn't recognise where he is but he does recognise the beautiful dead body lying in the next room. In a panic, he cleans up all traces of himself (and, inadvertently, the killer) and flees the scene. Later that day, the news of Valeria Sommers' death rocks the studio.

Production of her movie closes down until a replacement for the dead actress can be found. When the screenwriter talks to the head of studio security, he sees a crime-scene photograph of the dead girl, but it's not how he left her. Someone has rearranged her death to look like a suicide.

Wracked with guilt, the screenwriter tells the truth to his alcoholic best friend, a loose cannon who is a blacklisted writer and just threw a punch at Bob Hope. Sharing the secret is something the screenwriter is going to regret.

If you're a fan of Hollywood murder mysteries with more than a touch of *Sunset Boulevard* and *The Lost Weekend*, you're going to love *The Fade Out*. It is a lovingly realised comic-book noir and it works like a dream. This volume comprises the first four issues in the series, and once you start reading you won't want to stop – with a story as addictive as this, there should actually be a law against leaving readers to wait until the next volume's released so we can find out what happens next.

True, it's not the most original of concepts. There are plenty of nods towards the seamy side of Tinseltown but nothing we didn't already know – how the studios covered up scandals, how the casting couch never got a day off, the wild orgies in the Hollywood hills – and the cast of characters are familiar as well: the washed up writer, the studio secretary wearing her heart on her sleeve, the two-fisted movie star, the beautiful starlet who'll do whatever it takes to succeed. But that's a winning recipe and

Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips cook it up well, throwing in some fascinating textures along the way: the McCarthy blacklist, a brief encounter with Clark Gable, a belligerent German film director who's obviously Erich Von Stroheim under another name, and a neat joke about Bob Hope and Bing Crosby assassinating Adolf Hitler in *The Road to Berlin* (shades of the recent crisis over *The Interview*?) Look carefully in the background of the party scenes, you're not sure who you might recognise. Let's hope *The Fade Out* gets greenlit for a second volume very soon – it's bold, stylish, sexy and it should run and run...

IAN WHITE

★★★★★

9



PIXEL JUICE

NEWS AND PREVIEWS
IN GAMING
BY LEE PRICE



Capcom Claims RESI 7 Will Blow Minds

Given the recent financial troubles that have been experienced by Capcom it is perhaps somewhat surprising to hear them come out and claim that the latest **Resident Evil** game will blow gamers' minds.

Given the poor performance of the previous game in the series, in which an enormous team of developers worked tirelessly to help us all decide that the co-op play that Capcom are so in love with is actually an awful thing, you would think the company would perhaps temper the hype surrounding the seventh game in the series and instead let the (hopefully) improved quality of the title do all of the talking.

That's not the case, however, and game producer Michiteru Okabe, who has been working on **Revelations 2**, has recently come out with the following statement: "We don't really have a window into whatever else is going on. That would be a separate team and whatever that team is doing we're confident that those guys are going to do something that's going to blow our minds. We can't wait to basically be there with you guys to find out whatever the heck that is."

Perhaps that statement is a touch ambitious given the state of **Resident Evil 6**; especially as no details about number 7 have been made public yet. Still, the company has done it plenty of times before so there is every possibility that they may do it again. An increased focus on survival, better pacing and getting rid of the bloody co-op would all be great ways to start.

COMING SOON



MARIO PARTY 10

PLATFORM: Wii U

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 20TH

The Mario Party series has always been a popular one amongst those who like their party games, though it has never reached the heights of Smash Bros or Mario Kart. The Wii U version looks to be much the same, so anybody who is looking for something revolutionary here would be better advised to look elsewhere. Still, you have to imagine that Nintendo will think up a few creative ways to make use of the tablet controller and it will be a great purchase for those who like to get a good multiplayer session going.

LEGO JURASSIC WORLD and LEGO MARVEL AVENGERS Announced

It seems that it is almost impossible these days to have a major movie property that doesn't end up in the hands of the guys and girls who develop **LEGO** games and the upcoming **Jurassic World** and **Avengers** films are no different.

TT Games Managing Director Tom Stone commented on the upcoming games, stating: "This year will be the biggest yet for **LEGO** videogames with these incredible titles and several firsts for the series. TT Games are crafting humorous **LEGO** adventures, based on new stories and characters across some of the most well-known and iconic worlds."

While the games won't be reinventing the wheel anytime soon, fans of previous **LEGO** games will surely be able to enjoy them and it will be interesting to see how the **Jurassic World** universe is represented in building block format. It appears that **LEGO** games featuring more properties are on their way soon too so look out for any future announcements.

COMING SOON



MORTAL KOMBAT X

PLATFORM: MULTIPLE

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 14TH

After the massive success of the last Mortal Kombat game, which reenergised a franchise that had been in the doldrums for years, it was only natural that another game would follow sooner or later. Mortal Kombat X will be familiar territory for fans of the previous game, though the ability to change between three different variations for each character, each offering a different moveset, should spice things up a little bit. Look for plenty of hacking, smashing and tongue-in-cheek humour.

Release Date Announced for ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE on Consoles

Bethesda are going the right way about drumming up interest for the console version of **Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited**. Not only has the company announced that the game will be made available to console gamers on June 9th they have also confirmed that there will be no monthly subscription fees attached to the game.

The news will come as a pleasant surprise for those who are used to the likes of **World of Warcraft's** subscription services and it's surely going to help Bethesda cement their place amongst the online gamers of the PS4 and Xbox One.

The world created in the **Elder Scrolls** mythology has always seemed ripe for online exploration and it seems Bethesda want to place as few hurdles in the way of the experience as possible. This is news to get very excited about.

Pluto Probe New Horizon Comes Out of Hibernation

Here's an interesting little tidbit. NASA's New Horizon probe, which is used to explore Pluto in more depth, has come out of hibernation after seven years. What does this have to do with gaming you ask? Well the probe is powered by the very same CPU that was behind the original Sony PlayStation.

While there are obviously a few differences, it is pretty cool to know that the MIPS R3000 model chips are still being used to power the probe's thrusters and guidance systems. Plus we now know that our humble PlayStations are pretty much capable of going into space.

COMING SOON



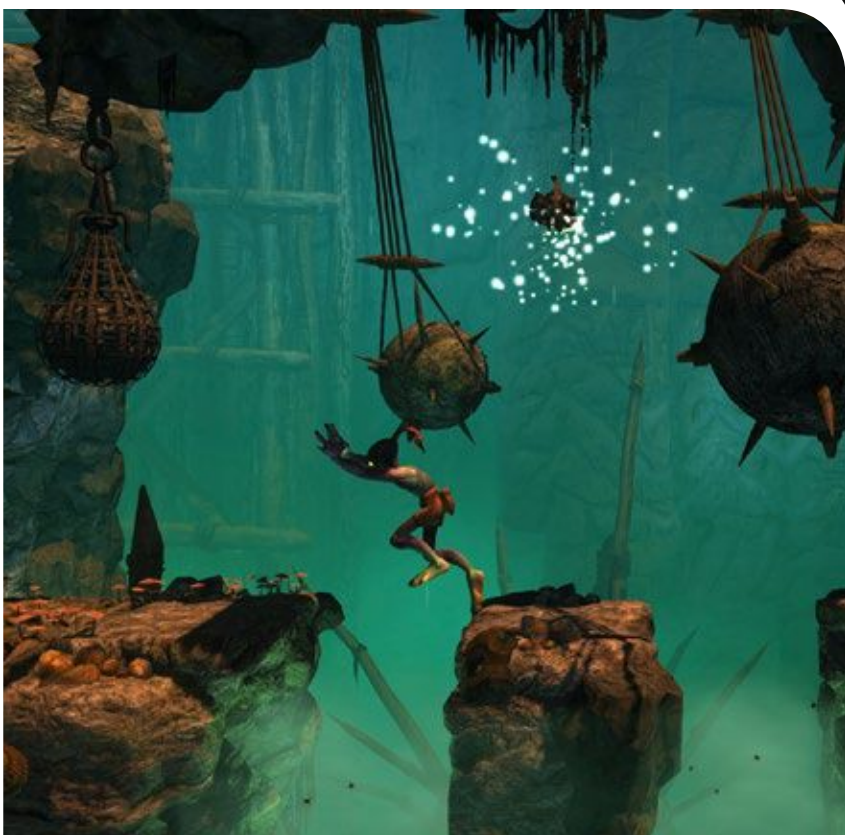
FINAL FANTASY TYPE-0 HD

PLATFORM: PS4, XBOX ONE

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 20TH

The argument could certainly be made that Square has become overly reliant on the Final Fantasy IP in recent years; however, it can't be argued that it still remains a lucrative cash cow for the company. Final Fantasy Type-0 HD was released on the PSP a few years back, so this version is just a graphical upgrade for the most part, though a few extra difficulty levels are added. Fans of Final Fantasy XIII will be in their element here, as the game is set in the same universe, as will fans of Crisis Core thanks to the gameplay style.

COMING SOON



ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY!

PLATFORM: PC, PS3 AND XBOX 360

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 25TH

This remake of the classic Abe's Oddysee has been available on the PS4 and Xbox One for about half a year and has been received pretty well by the gaming public so far. That has prompted Oddworld Inhabitants to release the game on the previous generation of consoles as well, and gamers who want to get a good blast from the past could do a lot worse. Those who prefer their platformers a little more cerebral will also be in for a treat, especially if they didn't play the original.

SEGA Axing 300 Jobs

It appears that SEGA are experiencing some difficult times as they have announced that they will be reducing staff by 300 people in a restructuring effort that the company believes will improve their overall profitability.

In sad news for console games, it appears this restructuring will be geared towards focusing more on mobile games development and the company has been less than clear on how the shakeup will affect their console teams.

While the redundancies have been planned for almost a year, along with the move of the San Francisco studio to California, it's still worrying times for SEGA fans. Hopefully, those who lost their jobs will bounce back soon and the company itself will continue to place some focus on the console market.

Club Nintendo to Close

Club Nintendo, which is the company's loyalty reward scheme, is to be closed down after nearly six years offering games with free memorabilia and games for purchasing Nintendo products.

Users of the service were previously able to obtain coins for registering Nintendo games and completing surveys on the Club's website, however it appears that Nintendo will be shutting down the service to make way for something new.

Nintendo of America's executive vice president of Sales and Marketing Scott Moffitt commented: "We thank all Club Nintendo members for their dedication to Nintendo games and their ongoing love for our systems and characters. We want to make this time of transition as easy as possible for our loyal Club Nintendo members, so we are going to add dozens of new rewards and downloadable games to help members clear out their Coin balances."

It will be interesting to see what the company will replace the Club with and many a Nintendo gamer are sure to be sad to see it go.



THEME HOSPITAL Offered Free on Origin

Fans of classic games rejoice. The brilliant **Theme Hospital** is being offered for free on EA's Origin service, following in the footsteps of **Sim City 2000** only a few weeks ago.

Unfortunately, the game will only be offered for a limited time, so it may very well be gone from the service by the time you read this. However, if you do manage to get your hands on it the game will be yours forever, in much the same way that games downloaded through Games with Gold are.

Never fear though. EA's 'On the House' service is sure to be updated with other games in due course so be sure to keep an eye out for any other classics that the company have on offer. As for **Theme Hospital**, the company has declined to comment on just how long the game will be available for and instead said: "Just make sure to act fast because *On the House* specials can appear and disappear at any time."

Frankly, it's nice to see EA do something that doesn't paint them out to be evil people, so take advantage of it while you can.

Telltale Working on Original IP

They've built a reputation by taking already popular properties and making great adventure games out of them but now it looks like Telltale are going to be unleashing one of their own creations on the gaming public.

The company has a new CEO in the form of co-founder Kevin Bruner and it appears that he has some pretty big plans for the developer.

He recently released a statement claiming: "We're already working on some of the biggest franchises in entertainment, and when you add our unannounced partnerships and upcoming original IP, it's clear the most exciting time to be at Telltale is now, and there will continue to be more and more opportunity to innovate ahead of us."

It looks like there is a lot more yet to come from the studio and fans of their more recent output will be very intrigued by the promise of a new IP. We can only assume it will still follow the adventure game mould, but at the same time it will be interesting to see what the developer can come up with when left to its own devices.

Man Arrested Over Holiday DDoS Attacks

Many a gamer's Christmas was somewhat ruined thanks to a DDoS attack that was targeted against the Xbox and PlayStation online services. The attack, which basically flooded servers with requests to the point that they broke down, have been an increasingly common attack option for those who are that way inclined over recent years.

However, it now looks like some headway is being made into the investigation regarding who committed the attack following the arrest of an 18-year-old man in Southport last month. It's unknown at this point if the man is part of the 'Lizard Squad'

COMING SOON



DARK SOULS II: SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN

PLATFORM: MULTI
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 3RD

Another re-release here, with Dark Souls II getting the touching up treatment. Scholar of the First Sin brings the original game together with all of its DLC into a nice little package for those who missed out the first time. Furthermore, players on newer consoles will also get upgraded graphics and sound for what will apparently be a much more complete experience.

Regardless, the game is brilliant, if pad-smashingly difficult, so it's well worth visiting if you haven't already.

that claimed responsibility for the attacks and police have yet to comment further about the nature of the arrest.

What is known is that the man was arrested on suspicion of unauthorised access to computer material and knowingly providing false information to law enforcement, so it will be interesting to see just where this goes and if any further arrests end up being made.

COMING SOON



DEAD ISLAND 2

PLATFORM: MULTI
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 24TH

Dead Island 2 will finally give players a chance to play a follow up to the massively popular first game in the series. Despite this popularity, the original title had more than its share of faults and never quite delivered on the initial promise that it displayed. The game is touted as being more vibrant, much larger and featuring an increase in the brutality level, which should be good news for any fan of zombie slaughter.

Sony Teases METAL GEAR RISING 2

The original Metal Gear Rising was a welcome departure from traditional Metal Gear fare and it went a long way to fleshing out the character of Raiden, in addition to being the first game in the series to really let players get hands on with one of the ninja characters that had previously been so impressive in cutscenes.

Now it looks like a second one may well be on its way. Nothing has been fully confirmed at the time of writing, but Sony's recent appearance at the 2015 Taipei Game Show hinted at the possibility with a number two in the style of the font used for Rising's logo being shown during a presentation highlighting upcoming games.

There is no word from Kojima and company about the possibility just yet, though Kojima's Twitter account does seem to be hinting that he has been meeting up with Platinum games recently. Could it be for Metal Gear Rising 2? We can only hope.

THE LATEST
GAMING RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED

REVIEWS



RESIDENT EVIL HD REMASTER

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: CAPCOM / PLATFORM: PC, PLAYSTATION 4, PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX ONE, XBOX 360 / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Based upon the Gamecube remake of the release that kick-started an entire franchise, Resident Evil HD Remaster is everything Evil Within should have been. Retaining the daft B-movie plot and slow, methodical gameplay as you face down the shambling hordes of the undead, it doesn't take long to realise that a minor graphical upgrade was all that this ever needed.

The story is exactly as fans remember: the S.T.A.R.S. police taskforce is sent in to investigate multiple murders near Racoon City, only to find the woodlands infested with horrors. With the first team having crashed and the second separated from their helicopter, the survivors seek refuge from the undead nightmares within a sizable mansion. Unfortunately for Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine, they soon realise the fun has only just begun...

For all its overt cheesiness, Resident Evil's greatest success stems from its slowly building, chilling atmosphere. Whereas many modern releases opt for fast moving swarms of zombies or mobs, the classic series' main appeal came from the threat of the slow moving moaning rotting monstrosities. Thanks to the narrow camera angles, extremely limited ammunition and the threat of corpses returning in vastly more powerful forms, even the most basic enemy can prove to be a severe threat.

The mansion itself is chillingly designed with deep shadows and beautiful rendering which stands up well even

today. It's a credit to the developer's skills that so many locations, from the main foyer to the underground labyrinths, remain so memorable and maintain a sense of constant isolation. The real dread and tension is evoked by walking along the same corridor a hundred times to find nothing, then running headfirst into a zombie the moment you become complacent. Well, that or a zombie dog after they start breaking into the mansion from outside in one famous bit.

Unfortunately, with every strength comes a flaw. While the port is thankfully stable and runs at a smooth sixty frames per second, there's no overlooking a few notable failings of the original. The auto-aiming system leaves no opportunity to reward accuracy, and the needlessly limited

inventory space the player is offered can slow an already slow burn to a shambling crawl. Even ignoring the Stone Age textures and uncanny valley characters, the flaws following successes improved upon are glaringly obvious from the beginning.

This is really all that Resident Evil HD Remaster is – every success and failing has been brought forwards in this latest remastering, with little real change. That said however, it still remains an extremely well made horror game and those still smarting from the painfully disappointing Evil Within would do well to give this one another chance.

CALLUM SHEPARD

★★★★★★★★★ 8



STARBURST



SUNLESS SEA

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: FAILBETTER GAMES / PLATFORM: PC /
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Proof of just what crowd funding is capable of in the right hands, Sunless Sea is a tie-in release to Failbetter's Fallen London. Set away from the city itself and exploring the vast underground world London was dragged into when Queen Victoria made a Faustian pact with the devil, the focus here is on the distant lands. Your job is to run cargo between ports desperate for new supplies, seek out new land, and engage in the odd bit of piracy. Having cited the likes of

FTL: Faster Than Light as a major influence along with Sid Meier's Pirates and Don't Starve, you can guess the sort of game Failbetter was aiming for. Often you are left simply on your wits, skills and whatever upgrades you can afford to stay ahead of corsairs, keep your crew sane and buy enough fuel to keep your ship afloat. This is to say nothing of the potential curve balls thrown at you by your own history, chosen prior to starting, or those of the crew you build up. Everyone from the

cook to the engineer harbours old secrets, physical and emotional scars, and stories which require closure.

The questing system and truly immersive writing are what can be attributed for so much of the game's success. While the artistic direction offers Sunless Sea a fantastic visual motif, every line of dialogue and moment is written to be as memorable as possible. The style is akin to a far more twisted incarnation of Terry Pratchett's Discworld prose, one which perfectly fits the macabre style of the underzee. While characters are often only spoken to a handful of times, the style and presentation of their personalities is enough to make them have significant impact upon whatever narrative the player is forging.

Of course, all this is not to mention the combat. Having undergone some notable changes during its beta, Failbetter abandoned a traditional turn-based system in favour of more conventional combat. The main concern in battle is the amount of time it takes to secure an accurate shot at the enemy, keeping them

within your main cannon's firing arc while trying to avoid damage. While relatively simple, it remains engaging nonetheless thanks to the speed, precision and planning required to engage enemies. This proves to be especially true when you so often sail into far superior foes, such as a living carnivorous island.

Sunless Sea is easily one of the single greatest games of its genre, backed by some truly superlative writing. If you have any investment at all in rogue-like adventuring and exploration then buy this one for a truly unique experience.

CALLUM SHEPARD

★★★★★★★★★★10



WOOLFE: THE RED HOOD DIARIES

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: GRIN GAMESTUDIO / PLATFORM: PC,
PLAYSTATION 4, XBOX ONE / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW (PC), MARCH 17TH
(PLAYSTATION 4, XBOX ONE)

Following their successful Kickstarter campaign in summer 2015, GRIN Studios have released their first PC title Woolfe: The Red Hood Diaries on Steam Early Access. The game tells the twisted story of Red Riding Hood, who has grown up and embarks on a journey to avenge her parents' death with some jumping around and hitting tin soldiers and rats with an axe along the way.

The game starts with a dark monologue from a Red Riding Hood who is older than she was in the fairytale and a

little less sweet. Her mother and father have been killed and the town she lives in is owned by the ruthless rich man and factory owner B.B. Woolfe, who has an army of tin soldiers at his disposal. The town gives off a very eerie feel to it, with missing posters on the walls and nothing but tin soldiers marching around the place. It makes the place feel empty and for good reason.

Throughout the game there are a few mean creatures that try to kill Red Riding Hood and, although it

is loosely based on a fairytale, Red Riding Hood mentions "This is not a fairytale. There's nothing fair about it." And equipped with a lumberjack's axe, you can make quick work of most enemies throughout the game. At times the combat can seem a little floaty and boring since many parts of the game are not pure combat but merely jumping puzzles with a couple of enemies for you to chop at.

The platforming itself is reasonably good, with some environmental puzzles that are relatively easy to solve with the camera basically showing you what to do as soon as you get there. Although, even if it didn't there isn't much of a puzzle in the first place; most of the time it's just 'turn a valve over there a few jumps away to open a door you need to go through'. But the environment and Red's creepy rhyming make it worthwhile.

The chase scenes are good fun though, and are quite reminiscent of similar scenes in Crash Bandicoot (when you had to run from a giant boulder or a dinosaur). Although you are now running

from human-sized toy soldiers, the same problems from Crash Bandicoot remain too; when you can't see where you are going it makes it very frustrating when you fail a few times and have to remember the layout of the level to succeed. The camera does also experience a few bugs at times with clipping issues and not being able to see where you are going sometimes as is often the case with early access releases.

WARRICK HORSLEY

★★★★★★★★★★6





XCOM: THE BOARD GAME

DESIGNER: ERIC M. LANG / PUBLISHER: FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES / RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Traditional game players tend to be a bit smug about the advantages that their hobby has over video games. As a rule, board games don't require complicated technology and are innately social in nature. This makes games that tie into video games a little weird; they either fail to simulate the thing they're based on, or they are so different that it hardly feels like a tie-in. XCOM: The Board Game exceeds expectations in several ways. First, it really feels like it's a worthy addition to the alien invasion-thwarting XCOM series and secondly it can be played solo or in a group. It also uses modern technology in a very clever way.

The game requires a free to download app in order to work. This application can be ran on anything that runs a web browser, so that includes phones, tablets, PCs, even your fridge if you've got a really fancy one. You don't need an internet connection to play the game, but you do need one to get the app in the first place. The app contains the rules, an FAQ and specialised timer that controls the action in the game.

Unlike the 'hands on' feel of the video games, this version takes a more global approach. World maps are pretty common in co-operative games, but XCOM: The Board Game really does make you feel like you're a team of international executives, charged with saving the world from alien invasion. Each player assumes one or more key roles: Commander, Squad Leader, Chief Scientist, and Central Officer. If you're playing alone of course, you have all the jobs.

The commander wrangles cash and can shoot down UFOs. The Chief Scientist researches all sorts of cool widgets that make everyone else's job easier

and the Squad Leader defends the base and completes mission cards. Enough completed mission cards will win the game, but if everyone else does their job poorly, they'll spend most of their time and resources defending the base.

One of XCOM's innovations is with the role of Central Officer. They control the app and the timer, as well as the early warning satellites. What this means is that you have one player telling you exactly how long you have to make your turn. The clock is ticking, and the longer you take, the harder it becomes to win. At the end of each turn, the app gives the players feedback, and this affects things like cash and how many UFOs are descending.

This nifty method circumvents one of the limitations of co-op games; because time is so precious, no one has time to dither and it reduces the odds of one player trying to order everyone about. The result

is incredibly chaotic alien-bashing fun as people are forced to think quickly.

We also discovered that if you have two boards, you can play head to head, each player running a solitaire game and racing against each other. We don't think the game is intended to be played this way, but it sure is fun.

Don't let the requirement of having a portable computer put you off this boardgame; chances are you have something that runs the app in your pocket and it really does add a level of complexity rarely found in games of this nature. Legendary games designer Eric M. Lang has pulled off an incredible feat here, and this game is absolutely worth your time.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★★★ 9



ROLL FOR DAMAGE

ED FORTUNE
GUIDES YOU
THROUGH THE
REALM OF
TABLETOP GAMING



Anyone who's ever watched an Indiana Jones movie (or even *The Muppets*) knows that the best way to travel round the world is via map. That simple little dotted line on a map can cover vast distances in a tiny amount of time. Of course, the only way to do this without movie magic is to use the terrible power of board games.

Globetrotting board games are nothing new. Most of us are familiar with games that use a map as a board but typically, the method of moving from Russia to Paris is by leading an army of toy soldiers all the way across Europe. Fantasy Flight Games' *Eldritch Horror* series avoids this by making players take on the role of a globetrotting adventurer, each tasked with the difficult job of preventing the end of the world.

In this case, the apocalypse is caused by a horrific creature from beyond sanity turning up and wiping out mankind as if it was an inconvenient bathroom mould. Working as a team, players jaunt round the world, defeating cultists and monsters, and gathering up artefacts and clues. The aim of the game is to solve a number of mysteries before something truly wicked turns up and applies the cosmic bleach. (Though there is a slim chance that the players can still win the day even once it arrives; so slim that it's almost comical.)

If *Eldritch Horror* sounds familiar, it's because it's very similar to *Arkham Horror*;

it even shares the same artwork, and of course they're both set in the Cthulhu Mythos. I'm a big fan of *Arkham Horror*; I'm one of those rare freaks who's played all the expansions threaded together into one mega-game (it takes a weekend). However, all these expansions still limit the game to Arkham and a handful of other towns. The old game also suffers from age. FFG have learned a lot since it first developed this game back in 2005. Since its publication, many expansions - as well as the spin-off games *Elder Sign* and *Mansions of Madness* - have improved greatly on the gameplay. This has meant that *Eldritch Horror* is a vastly superior game, and looks set to take its

ancestor to the ritual chamber to be done away with.

Eldritch Horror is a very slick game; there's an economy to the card design that means that once you've got your head round all the little rules, it's a simple matter of flipping over cards, plotting your next move and rolling dice. It's also a lot more immersive than *Arkham*; whereas the previous game lacked any real sense of global urgency and terror, with *Eldritch*, the world you're saving is right in front of you. It's also fairly quick to play; with eight players it should take no longer than three hours. Like its predecessor, it does suffer from the fact that in larger games it can take a while to swing round to your turn.





However, it's immersive and interesting enough to encourage players to pitch in at each level; with the right crowd you can have a lot of fun weaving your own story around the various things that happen to yourself and other people. You can also improvise explanations for the slightly odder things that happen due to the randomised nature of the game. How exactly did your investigator (who just happens to be a major Hollywood actor) come across a copy of *The Necronomicon* in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean? You may as well come up with a reason, because it's going to be a while until it's your turn again.

Eldritch Horror isn't perfect but it's a lot more fun than its dad and it's easier to play. It still has a few irritating niggles; they are still wacky 'miss a turn' style mechanics, and given that you can be waiting a good while between your turns, this does seem unnecessary.

Being a Fantasy Flight Game, there are already expansions out for it. *Forsaken Lore* was the first, and it's a cute little pack of stuff. It introduces Yig, the evil snake god from the Cthulhu Mythos and a bit of an also-ran when compared to the likes of Cthulhu. The pack beefs up Yig and gives you a pile of horrible snake-related horrors to hit. It also beefs up all the other threats as well - more big beasts to take

on towards the end of the game. There's a nice pile of kit for the characters, many of which are two-sided. (I particularly like the *Massa di Requiem per Shuggay* item; it defeats monsters at the risk of making the game end in cataclysm, which can be a tempting gamble.) It also features cards that make it more tempting to skip a turn, which are a bit boring. Overall, it's a cool set; but you do wonder why they didn't put a lot of this in the main box. (That said; the main game is pretty packed to begin with.)

The second expansion, *Mountains of Madness* is clearly inspired by the short story of the same name. It's a big box that adds an additional board to the game: Antarctica. If that's sent a shiver up your spine, congratulations; you've read some H.P. Lovecraft. It introduces focus tokens, which is essentially a way of picking up re-rolls and special abilities at the cost of inaction earlier on in the game. It also has some pretty nifty equipment cards; I rather like the Dog Sled. Partially because you can move around Antarctica quickly, but mostly so I can scream 'mush' a lot while playing. (Although, something about this game inspires players to sing songs from *Frozen*, which is its own sort of horror.)

In addition to all sorts of horror, there are also Prelude and Adventure mechanics. Adventures are basically little side-quests

that make it a little easier to win the game, whereas Preludes add extra story to the game as well as giving the players a much needed edge. Additional playable characters also come with this set, and they're a little bit better than the ones in the main set. Finally, *Mountains of Madness* adds two new end-game threats: Rise of the Elder Things, which are frankly hideous and really hard to defeat, and everybody's favourite snow god, Ithaqua. I'm a sucker for Wendigos and Yeti, and for me, this cool creature (plus the new board) makes the set worth my time on its own. If all the expansions are as good as *Mountains of Madness* (and we should expect more to come) then *Eldritch Horror* could well become a firm classic. The end of the world has never been so much fun.

As an aside, and on a barely related note, I recently got my dirty hands on *Magic: The Gathering's From the Vaults: Annihilation* boxed set. Long-time readers will gather that I'm a bit of an addict when it comes to *Magic* (and have yet to develop a full-blown *Netrunner* habit), but *Annihilation* really is a lovely little treat. It's a boxed set with 15 of the frankly most powerful, most disturbingly legal cards out there. If you like slipping the equivalent of a tactical nuclear weapon into your deck, then it's well worth a look. I'm a habitual Black/Red player, so the utter glee in throwing earthquakes, devastation, hordes of surprise horrors and burning death on my opponents made the set well worth the time.

Still on the subject of *Magic*, the recent launch for *Fate Reforged* featured a rather odd centrepiece: a cube that could be 'transformed' as players at the launch event completed certain tasks. The reward for running around and completing tasks was a series of cards with unique art. The story behind the event involved a change in the setting's timeline, causing the dragons to return. The new cards were remixes of existing artwork, with dragons replacing the creatures in the original card. A neat idea done in a fun way, though it was so heavily previewed, I doubt anyone was actually surprised. +

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STARBURST: EVENT PROFILE



WORDS: MARTIN UNSWORTH
PHOTOS: DIGICON



The rise of the cosplay movement amongst fans, along with the community it has spawned, has meant that it seems almost every town has a 'comic con' popping up. Like any business, putting a convention on is fraught with risks. It's to the testament of the crew behind Digi-Con, held at the exhibition centre within the massive Doncaster Racecourse, that this first-time event went so well.

With a line-up of cult stars signing and meeting fans that included famous faces from television, film and even wrestling nestled alongside a plethora of vendors, selling all manner of geek-related merchandise, it may well have been slightly overwhelming upon entering. But the layout was such that it didn't seem crowded. The guests too were spaced out so that any queues that may have formed didn't impede the flow of the assembled throng.

All the stars in attendance appeared to be enjoying their day, and were very personable and approachable. Some took part in on-stage panels and talks, another regular thing at these sorts of events. These took place in a separate area, but not so cut off from the main hall that one felt they were missing anything. There was also no ticket system in place for these, being a first-come-first-

served arrangement for seats. No doubt as the event grows in future years, this may well change but the way it worked for this debut event seemed to suit everyone fine. Subjects ranged from Doctor Who to comic books, and went down really well with the fans.

Away from the geek-fuelled world of comics, films and games, there was a wrestling ring set up, in which a local indie group entertained the grapple fans. Although this was more like the traditional sport as opposed to its glitzy American counterpart, it drew a good, enthusiastic crowd who enjoyed every move. One of the guests represented the glamour of the American Wrestling world, as former WWE star Amy Dumas was signing and meeting fans. Better known under her stage name Lita, she was a popular draw who was always busy and very good with the fans.

As was Farscape's Virginia Hey, who was incredibly entertaining and enthralled every single person who came to chat with her. Last minute addition Hannah Spearritt (Primeval) proved to be another popular guest. Naturally, the stars of Doctor Who and Star Wars were doing steady business too.

Among the other exhibitors was film director Darren Scates, who had made an ultra-low-budget sci-fi film, The Drift. As well as selling copies of the film (with all the proceeds going to charity), he had on

display some props made for the shoot. These included an impressive model spaceship (complete with tiny people inside) and a space suit, which we were told was made from a bin!

Other displays included an array of film-related cars (including The A-Team's van), some replica models from Battlestar Galactica, a series of busts and costumes from the Terminator movies (complete with Arnie mannequin), several different Iron Man costumes, and assorted TARDISes and Daleks, as well as other Doctor Who replicas. These were all great conversation pieces and attracted a lot of attention.

It was the fans who had turned up in cosplay that really made the event, though, each one remarkable in their own way, and certainly making the judging of the competition for best costume much harder. Those who wished to take part in the cosplay contest all enjoyed their time in the spotlight, performing a short routine on the stage, much to the enjoyment of the assembled audience.

As a first-time event, Digi-Con went remarkably smoothly; although a more cautious promoter may have opted for a one-day affair, it appears the two days that the show took place served the fans well, which is, of course, who these conventions are for anyway.



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PAUL MOUNT'S



This month, we scale the heights of Sky One/Syfy's ASCENSION, hurriedly reconsider THE FLASH, find not much to laugh about in ITV2's COCKROACHES and say a fond farewell to IN THE FLESH...

As sci-fi/genre/fantasy fans, it sometimes seems that we're almost genetically programmed to expect our TV entertainment to be as convoluted and protracted as possible. We love nothing more than relishing the prospect of six or seven seasons of our favourite shows, rolling about in the characters and the serpentine twists and turns of elaborately and carefully crafted storylines. But of course it's not always like that, is it? We've all had our fingers burned from time to time and invested hours of our lives (which, remember, we won't get back) in season after season of shows like *Lost* and *The X-Files*. Looking forward eagerly to the moment of Great Resolution when story arcs and threads we've carefully followed (or tried to follow) for five or six years finally come together in a massive explosion of creative genius, which leave us dazzled and in awe of the superminds that have finely-tuned these

modern-day myths. But in time, we discover what we might have secretly suspected all along: that many of these shows were just made up on the hoof, that the writers and creators, caught by surprise by the success of their shows, really had no idea where their story was going and what was waiting when they finally reached the end point. So, who didn't become exasperated by the ending of *Lost* and the inability of *The X-Files* to properly resolve its various conspiracy theories? I've often canvassed the view that sometimes it's better just to tell a story – one story – over a limited number of episodes. Give it a beginning, middle and a very clearly defined end. That way we avoid the madness of shows like *Under the Dome* which needed nothing more than one ten-episode series but which now looks like a year-after-year fixture when most of the audience were losing interest halfway

through the first season. I now couldn't care less why Chester's Mill is under a dome and I won't be around to find out the explanation – but I suspect it'll be one which will annoy and antagonise those who've kept the faith.

So to *Ascension*, a six-episode 'event' mini-series broadcast on Syfy in the States last year (as three double-length episodes) which arrived on Sky One in the UK in January. Although clearly set up as a potentially long-running, renewable title, the show is currently a one-off. And whilst it inevitably ended up with a 'give us a series please!' cliffhanger should Syfy decide to green light a second run, I'd actually have preferred it if the show had just got the job done as a genuine one-off, a series which told its story and left it at that. Some chance.

Word of warning: it's impossible to review *Ascension* without blowing the gaff on its Big Reveal. So if you haven't seen the show yet, if it's sitting on your hard drive or if you're waiting for it to turn up on DVD or some streaming service or other or for it to be beamed directly into your brain, then you'd best skip along to the rest of the column or even onto *It's Only A Movie*. Spoilers lay ahead because they have to, so don't start whingeing once I've given the game away.

In 1963, six-hundred men, women, and children are sent into space on a massive 'space ark' called *Ascension* to seek out a new world and ensure the survival of the human race should the Cold War turn distinctly arctic back on Earth. Fifty years later, a thriving society with enduring 1960's morality and ideals has developed aboard the ship as it powers across space in search of its new home. Except it isn't. Here it comes... *Ascension* has never left the Earth. The massive structure is housed in a huge underground facility and the society aboard is being monitored as a huge (and deeply implausible) social experiment. But all is not well inside *Ascension*, and trouble is brewing on the outside world too. A young girl is murdered on *Ascension*'s artificial beach and power plays and conspiracies are developing outside which threaten the security of the 'experiment' and the lives of all those 'aboard' *Ascension*.

Ascension's moment of glory comes right at the end of the first episode when a fight sends a murder suspect spiralling



STARBURST



out of the ship's airlock... and down onto a crash mat somewhere nearby. This is where the rug is pulled right out from under us, as we realise that the whole *Ascension* experiment is a big fat lie. It's a breathlessly audacious and entirely untelegraphed plot development which I, for one, didn't see coming. It instantly turns *Ascension* from an interesting, if unexceptional, space opera into an intriguing and rather clever conspiracy theory story. But the 'reveal' is the best the show's got; aboard the ship we're treated to some slightly hokey soap opera storylines involving teenage infatuations, illicit affairs (with appropriate tame nudity) and shifty political manoeuvring. Outside the ship, there are conflicts between those who wish to end the experiment - and all those inadvertently participating in it - and those who are determined to protect it for reasons of their own.

Promising stuff. But the show's problem was that it just tried to cram too much into its relatively brief running time. There's too many characters, too many situations, too much plotting and counter-plotting... just *too many* ideas! It all felt incredibly rushed; as if it was desperate to show that it has potential to become a long-running series and not just a welcome one-off. Despite some clunky writing and over-eager performances, there was much to enjoy in *Ascension* - perhaps too much - and whilst I'm not, in theory, averse to seeing it return as a series it would have worked so much better with some of its meat removed, focussing on its core concepts and just telling its story, ending its story and leaving it done and dusted in six hours. Instead we have unresolved stories - the mystery of the supernaturally-powered Christa, and a cliffhanger which just screams 'WTF?' It's hard not to imagine that, somewhere in Hollywood, a team of writers are poised over their laptops waiting for the call to write more episodes - and it's equally hard not to believe that not one of them yet has a clue where the show might go next.

THE FLASH

With the world and its wife (hello, world's wife!) still insisting that the CW's *The Flash* is the best thing since sliced spandex, I decided that it was only fair that I persevered with the series which, you might recall, I passed slightly sniffy judgement on in issue 408. Sorry, kids, but it's still a bit lost on me. I mean, it's all fine and dandy, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with it but, for a show about a super-fast superhero - the fastest man alive! - it never seems to get out of first gear. It reminds me of *Smallville*, the Superman-when-he-was-a-boy series which pitted a teen Clark Kent (although as the series ran for ten years he looked about forty by the time it ended) against a variety of ne'er-do-wells who'd come into contact with some bit of red Kryptonite which had given them a random superpower. In *The Flash*, the bad guys are all 'meta-humans', imbued with some extraordinary ability

during the accident which gifted Barry Allen his super-speed and, as such, they just seem a bit lightweight, disposable and, usually, entirely one-dimensional - baddies for the sake of it, slightly nervous 'can-we-really-get-away-with-this' watered-down versions of larger-than-life comic strip characters. The show's focus remains, not unnaturally, on Barry Allen and his teen chums and their various relationships, and there still seems to be a reluctance to properly embrace the comic book origins and ethos of the character. I was quite perplexed by the much-trumpeted crossover between *The Flash* and sister (brother?) CW superhero show *Arrow* which saw the two costumed crimefighters teaming up after a bit of antagonism to bring down the episode's token mind-controlling bad guy. Much of the episode indulged itself in shameless fangasming and left about three minutes for *The Flash* and *Arrow* to actually work together as a team to defeat Mr whoever-he-was. So they didn't. Or at least, we didn't see it. *Flash* and *Arrow* agreed to team up for the Greater Good after trying to knock seven bells out of one another, and then we just cut to a scene of what's-his-face being locked up in Team *Flash*'s subterranean vault-cum-prison without any indication of how our heroes nobbled him. Now, you might choose to argue that this is all very clever, post-modern and iconoclastic; and that the point of the episode isn't the villain, it's the meeting of *Flash* and *Arrow* and their respective chums. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but any TV show which sets up a bad guy, however ephemeral, really needs to show that bad guy getting his lumps, otherwise what's the point in him being there? The episode was so in love with the idea of fully integrating the *Flash*/*Arrow* worlds that everyone involved forgot that there was another story being told, and having run out of time, left themselves with just sixty seconds to wrap the whole thing up. Sorry, that just doesn't work for me... tell me a proper story or ship the hell out.

The Flash and I may well cross paths again in the future - the show's already proved popular enough to secure a second season (so it isn't a flash in the pan after





all!), and I'm sure it'll enjoy a good long run (it's the joke that just keeps on giving) but I suspect that *The Flash* and I will never become fast friends.

COCKROACHES

If, as seems likely, the end of the world turns out to be no laughing matter, viewers of ITV2's apocalyptic 'comedy' series *Cockroaches* will be well prepared for the moment when the balloon finally goes up. Despite the impressive array of comedic talent the six-episode series has attracted – Alexander Armstrong, Nigel Planer, Caroline Quentin, Jack Whitehall (adopting a cod Jamaican accent, which has instantly transformed him into the most irritating man on television) – this is lame and predictable stuff. Set a decade after nuclear conflict has ravaged the world, Tom (Daniel Lawrence Taylor) and Suze (Esther Smith) are wandering through a blasted landscape with their nine-year-old daughter, a result of a frantic union just before the

apocalypse. They stumble across a gang of survivors led by Whitehall's Oscar, a former boyfriend of Suze in the *Old World*. Much/not much hilarity ensues as Oscar is deposed, and Tom finds himself elected leader of this ragtag ragged bunch of survivors and the scenario quickly degenerates into the usual collection of crude bodily function/fluid gags beloved of comedy series apparently aimed at a 'young' audience. Nowt wrong with a bit of smut, of course, but it's always helpful if it's actually funny and the characters delivering it are likeable and interesting. Taylor and Smith are the best thing about this lazy mess; if this is the quality of survivor we can expect from the end of the world then the human race is doomed and we're all up shit creek. Oooh look, I used a rude word. Laugh, damn you!

AND FINALLY...

So it's farewell, sadly, to BBC's bold and thought-provoking 'zombie' drama

In The Flesh, whose fans were put out of six months or so of misery as they awaited news of a potential third series by last month's announcement that there ain't gonna be no more. It's a shame as this is a show we here at STARBURST have championed since it first appeared in March 2013 and we were especially struck by the punchy, hard-hitting first three-episode series. It's always disappointing when a UK genre show with potential (and we don't get that many to start with) is struck down before their time – the BBC's *Survivors* reboot is another whose passing still cuts deeply. But the bald fact was that *In the Flesh* was the cultest of cult shows – its audience was tiny even by BBC Three standards – and the second series ultimately wasn't as self-assured as the first. An extended six-episode run allowed some longueurs to set in, the writing seemed a bit less measured and focussed and one or two performances fell on the wrong side of the ham counter. But it was a bold and sometimes beautiful series, which showed not only that it's still possible to do something a little bit different in the well-worn 'zombie' genre (and if I had more time and space I'd explain why *In The Flesh* wasn't really a 'zombie' show anyway, but if you've seen it you'll know what I mean) but also that its writer/creator Dominic Mitchell is a formidable and imaginative new talent who, if given the support and encouragement, has the potential to become a major industry player in years to come. A name to watch, for sure. *In the Flesh* may well have gone the way of all flesh (or all TV) but it accomplished more in nine episodes than many shows accomplish in nine series. +

I'm taking a sabbatical from TV ZONE duties for a short while but I'll be back – sorry, but I will – in a few months' time to resume my considered and occasionally flippant appreciation of all things weird and wonderful on ye olde TV machine. Ciao for now.



COCKROACHES

it's only a movie

a column by JORDAN ROYCE



Howard Elliot Ashman 1950-1991

In particular, the scene where Keaton's character is locked out of the theatre, and has to make his way through the crowd is a technical marvel, whilst also furthering the characters' descent into madness by stripping him of his clothes and dignity and forcing him to face his public in this humbling manner. As we lurch forward through this crucial period for Thomas in real time, we get more than swept along, you feel absorbed by the process. As I said, it's a gimmick, it just happens to be one of the best I've ever seen.

After my (thankfully) final trip to Middle-earth, I was actually hoping for a good start for 2015. To be honest, whilst 2014 threw up a few gems it was not the best of years overall, and I was a tad disappointed. 2015 is going to be different, I mused, as we put together our movies of the year for issue 408, as we could at least bank on **Star Wars** to stimulate the genre at the tail end. In fact, 2015 has had the strongest start I can remember. I have to apologise to regular readers who might find this month's column a little strange. I actually have nothing to moan about. So far I have seen three flicks that are pretty much guaranteed to be in my movies of the year already.

Birdman started the year off with a bang. I can't praise this movie enough. Surprisingly, I was the only person not swept along with the hype as, to be honest, I didn't rate the back catalogue of director Alejandro González Iñárritu (it is actually a name and not something bad that happens to you if you masturbate too much). Like much of his back catalogue, **21 Grams** is just a boring, pretentious dose of clinical depression that I have no desire to ever sit through

again! However, It does appear that Mr. Iñárritu has honed his skills considerably as **Birdman** is pretty close to a work of genius, and is just about as far from your typical Super Hero flick as you could have imagined possible.

The saga of Riggan Thomas is a compelling one. We lurch forward with him as he struggles to get his self-financed Broadway adaptation of a Raymond Carver story in front of an approving audience. Approval is the real goal for Thomas, as he seeks to distance himself from his Batman-esque alter ego that he played decades earlier. Michael Keaton plays this desperate character to perfection, and reminds us that we all really kinda like him, and like seeing him on screen. He is genuinely compelling (a word that I will have to use a lot regarding this movie); this serves as a welcome reminder of just how talented this guy always was, and still is. It's good to see him in a movie that actually allows him to shine again.

Much has been made of the 'single take' aesthetic that Iñárritu employs, and whilst it is a gimmick, it's a bloody potent gimmick, delivered to perfection. It's mesmerising to watch the movie unfold.

The rest of the cast are also none too shabby, with not a duff performance in sight. Ed Norton method acts an awkward, pretentious dickhead. Emma Stone is superb as his daughter and only real connection to this scary new world where success needs to be viral, and validation is currency. The cast are definitely the beating heart of this tale of integrity versus celebrity.

Another winning component is the soundtrack. An acid jazz drumscape acting almost as a Geiger counter of Thomas' sanity. It's a very clever use of music, and gives **Birdman** a unique vibe that furthers the feeling that you are, actually, watching something original for a change. Sadly, the wankers at the Academy don't share my enthusiasm, and have nixed its inclusion for Best Original Score. Apparently, it contains too much classical music. This is a popular get-out clause that they trot out every once in a while to scupper a movie that might not be to all their tastes. It's a shame as **Birdman** is in the running for some Oscars (yes a genre movie actually might bag some!), and the soundtrack is a big part of the identity of this flick, and another example of its creativity. The music branch of the

Academy is now just out of touch with the form and nature of a modern movie soundtrack. They need to do one, and get some young people involved.

Even in its final moments, **Birdman** manages to leave us debating what has actually happened. There are at least three options, and I am sure we will all have our favourite explanation. At the risk of sounding like some hipster twat, **Birdman** is an existentially driven comedy of pain. Everyone needs to go and see this film. It lives up to the hype, and then some...

Disney might be synonymous with a saga set in a galaxy far, far, away, but they have also released the latest entry into their core brand. That core brand being their official Disney Animated Features, which started back in 1938 with **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**. Well it's time for number 54 to hit the UK, and **Big Hero 6** takes Disney into some uncharted terrain.

Whilst it is fashionable for boneheads to bash the mouse house, I have always looked forward to a new Disney animated outing. It just seems to be the vogue to cite their corporate greed, and to downgrade the entertainment of our kids into merely a form of brain washing. These are popular topics of conversation at vegan dinner parties, where George Lucas and Disney get tons of unwarranted abuse from brainless, useless tossers who haven't done anything worth talking about with their own sad lives, and seek to compensate by finding fat cats to hold culpable for their lazy plight. In reality, Disney has been producing an outstanding body of work with their animated classics for over seven decades, and has contributed in a pretty positive way towards the formative years of many childhoods. You don't have to drag your brats down to the Disney store to buy a load of over-priced crap; you can actually just appreciate their movie output for what it is - part of the tapestry of youth.

Whilst the golden era of Disney in the forties and fifties might appear quaint to a twenty-first century audience, the Disney output of the early nineties (the appropriately lauded *Disney Renaissance* era) continues to cast its influence nearly a quarter century later. It was an era that was lightning in a bottle for the beleaguered company. Disney had been perceived to reach a creative dead end when the talking animals had taken centre stage in **Robin Hood**, and after struggling through the eighties, Howard Ashman and Alan Menken gave Disney a

new lease of life with the holy trinity of **The Little Mermaid**, **Beauty and the Beast**, and **Aladdin**.

The effect on pop culture of these three movies was seismic, and relied heavily on the magical partnership of

Ashman and Menken. I find it sad to reflect and imagine how much more could have been achieved if not for the sad death of Howard Ashman. He was a lyrical hero of the musical animation medium, and he didn't even get to see **Beauty and the Beast** or **Aladdin** in their final forms. AIDS in the 1980s was a cruel and devastating bastard of a virus that wiped out untold creative talent. Taking Howard Ashman from us at the age of 40 was one of the cruelest blows of them all...

The Disney rebirth continued apace until slightly coming off the rails in 2009 with **The Princess and the Frog**. I thought this was a great entry with its first black princess, and its New Orleans cultural slant (plus it had Voodoo in it - Wowzers!). Sadly, it opened opposite the disturbingly overrated movie **Avatar**, and little boys were turning into little bellends at the time, deciding that the word princess meant that it was for girls only (at least that what Disney focus groups later concluded). I just think that the Pixar look had become so prevalent that standard animation (even as perfect as **The Princess and the Frog**) simply didn't resonate with the **Toy Story** progeny. Disney had ended up owning the reason for their animated woes.

Disney was quick to recover, partnering up again with Alan Menken, and embracing their inner Pixar to bring us the immensely successful **Tangled**. Disney grabbed the look, had the music, and went for a deliberately nebulous title that appealed to owners of both sexual organs. It does sadden me that cel animation is out of vogue, but there is no doubt that **Tangled** was highly entertaining, and made them pots of cash. Success is hard to court martial. If **Tangled** got Disney back on track, **Frozen** took things to another level and is now their most successful entry to date. Again the **Tangled** aesthetic is present, and a title that allows boys and girls to join in without any gender identity confusion. **Frozen** also employed **The Little Mermaid** musical formula to perfection and delivered a song that went around the globe faster than Ebola. With Disney back on top, would collaboration with Disney-owned Marvel Comics work? A Disney Superhero movie with a manga flavour? Yeah, it works all right. It really bloody works...

Big Hero 6 is one of the strongest movies to come out of Disney. Set in the future city of San Fransokyo, **Big Hero 6** is the tale of how 14-year-old Hiro Hamada goes from hustling his way through underground robot wars (not the type hosted by former cocaine enthusiast and nighttime funster, Craig Charles) to forming his own six-man Justice league, and fighting to save the world. The story of Hiro is really tactfully handled, and any child who has lost parents at a young age will find that this saga resonates in an honest and uplifting way that I found commendable. By the time Hiro suffers another devastating bereavement you are

totally on board, and the heartwarming friendship that emerges between Hiro and his brother's medical robot Baymax is seriously moving stuff. Baymax himself is a fantastic creation. The animation team has made a character that resembles a giant butt plug into a genuinely endearing persona. There is a simple scene where Baymax is merely fixing a few punctures with Sellotape that is inexplicable comedy gold. Baymax gives out hugs like a drunken Glaswegian and I guarantee you will want one!

The animation style of **Big Hero 6** is perfect; the soundtrack by the superb Henry Jackman is robustly appropriate, and even a montage set to Fall Out Boy fails to nauseate! From start to finish Disney nail this, and even manages a post credit scene that should have comic fans high fiving. Disney has made a fantastically fun movie that should appeal to literally anyone, but for comic buffs in particular, it's a love letter to the genre. If you take someone to see this and they don't enjoy it, be aware that they are a soulless sod that needs ditching.

So **Birdman** blew me away (hmm, that sounded a bit wrong...), and Baymax gave me a big, warm, fuzzy feeling (that actually sounds even worse!). Surely in the first month of the year there can't be another great genre flick already? Yeah there was, and **Ex_Machina** delivered an intelligence that was anything but artificial.

Unlike the bullshit, pseudo-intellectualism of the Holy Nolan's 'opus' **Interstellar**, **Ex_Machina** is a genuinely intelligent sci-fi movie with a real message. A message it delivers with an uncomfortable confidence, and makes you think every step of the way. A scientist is invited to a rich dickhead's house to check out his creation, and rate her as a piece of artificial intelligence. The ensuing three-handed performance from Domhnall Gleeson as Caleb, Oscar Isaac as Nathan, and Alicia Vikander as 'Ava' is cinema nectar. Vikander in particular gives an incredible performance. I am going to deliberately keep this brief as I just want everyone to go and see this rare beast. A genuine sci-fi movie that assumes we can handle some actual science and philosophy without Tom Cruise and lots of explosions.

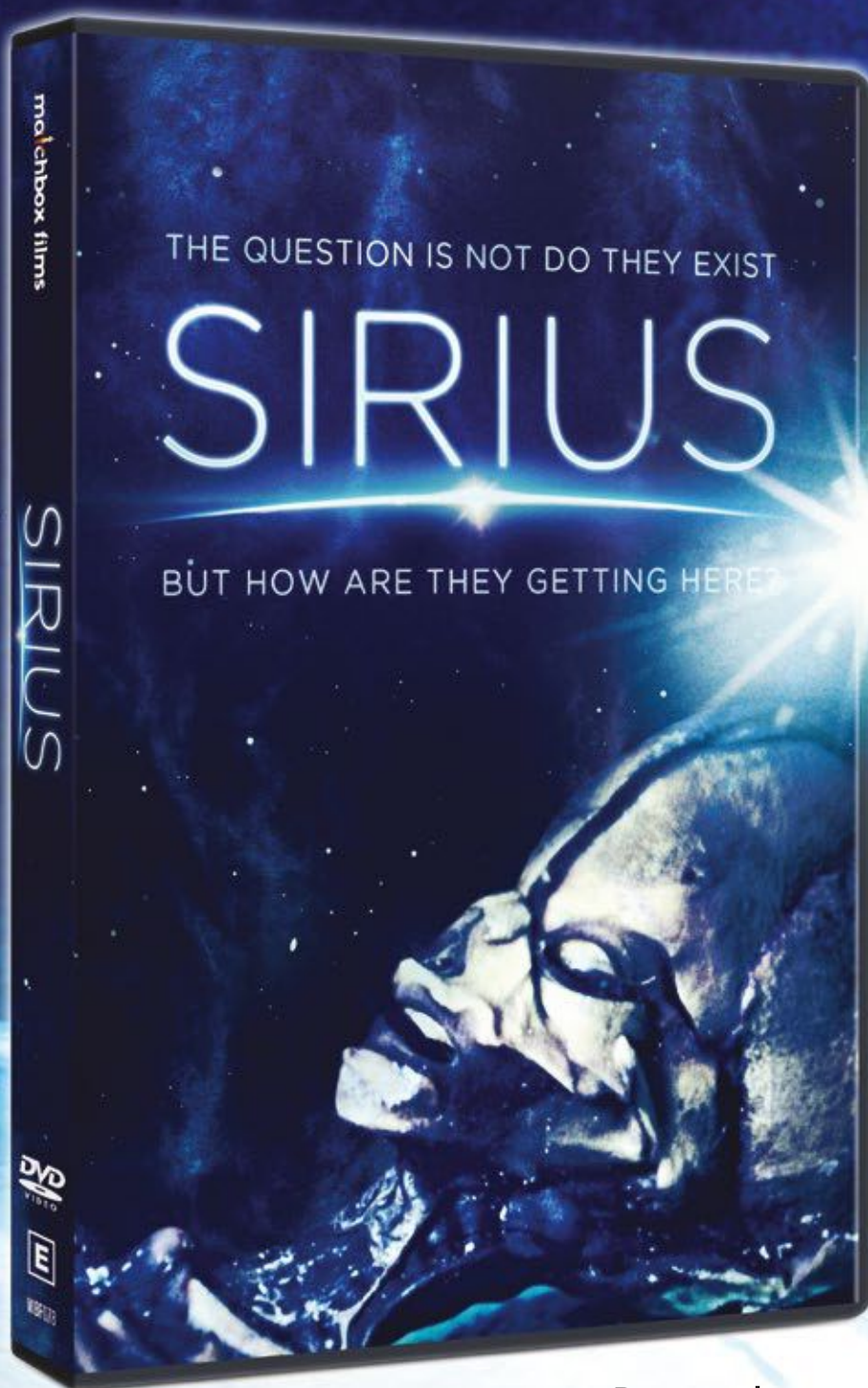
So I have genuinely been taken by surprise (thankfully not in a biblical sense), and 2015 has seen the strongest start for genre cinema since I took over this column. Who knows, maybe I can get to **Star Wars** without a hatchet job. I can dream right?



Jordan Royce can be contacted at jordan.royce@starburstmagazine.com and hosts the Starburst Radio Show every Wednesday 9pm until 11pm GMT on Fab Radio International www.fabradiointernational.com also available from iTunes as a Podcast



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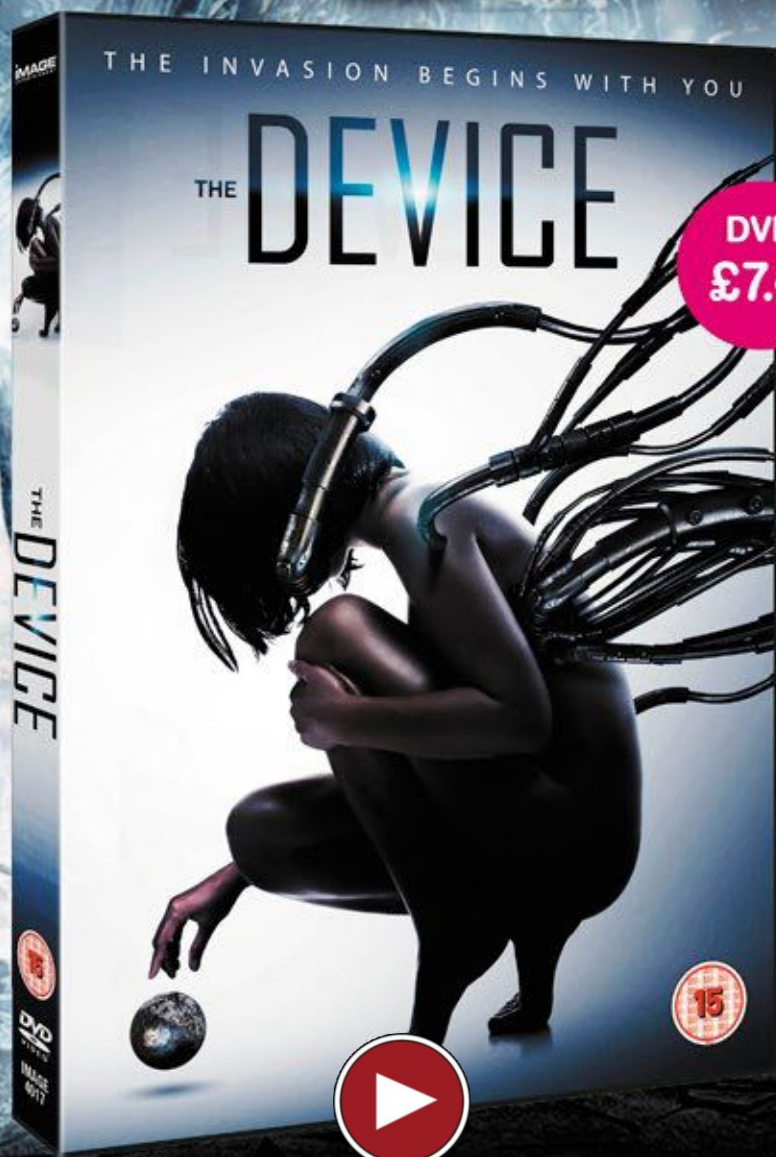
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